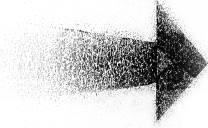**Chapter 1**

Society and Culture:
why we'll take longer baths in
the future

If you want to know your past, look at your present conditions.
If you want to know your future, look into your present actions.
–Buddhist saying

Early in 2006, Joyce Vincent, a middle-aged woman, was discovered dead in her London flat. There was nothing remarkable about this, except for the fact that she'd been dead for more than two years and her television was still on. How could this happen? Where was everyone? The answer, of course, was that everyone was somewhere else. London, like most major cities, no longer has neighbourhoods; it has collections of individuals leading increasingly isolated, selfish, and narcissistic lives. Neighbours keep to themselves, and people don't ask questions or volunteer information. In an age when everyone is increasingly connected to everyone else through the internet, nobody really knows anyone any more.

We have lots of friends, but few of them dig deep to understand our hopes and fears. The general feeling is that you'll live longer if you keep yourself to yourself.

In Japan there is a social phenomenon called 'hikikomori'. The phrase roughly translates as 'withdrawal' and refers to boys who retreat into their bedrooms and rarely, if ever, come out. In one case a young man shut his bedroom door in his early twenties and played video games, watched TV, and slept for fourteen years. Food was supplied by his mother, who lived downstairs, virtually alone. The phenomenon is a particularly Japanese condition, although nobody can quite understand who or what is to blame. According to experts, there are somewhere between 100,000 and 1 million hikikomori in Japan, caused by everything from absent (always-working) fathers to over-protective mothers.

There are a number of simple explanations for problems like this, and most are wrong. Some people blame individualism; others point the finger at urbanisation, technology, education, or even government. The reality is that it's all of these, but ultimately we have nobody to blame but ourselves. We, and only we, have let this happen. And if it's like this now, what will it be like in another fifty years?

Perhaps this is a strange way to start what is essentially a business book, but I think it's important to understand the bigger picture first.

I'm sitting in a budget hotel room at Miami International Airport. It's 10.30 p.m. My room is basic, but I have free access to the internet — either from my own computer or via a giant TV in my room. There is a coffee machine, complete with non-dairy creamer, and a small bar of hypoallergenic soap in the bathroom. Outside, on the other side of the freeway, a large neon sign reads 'Girls'. Unfortunately, inside the hotel, humans are rather absent. Indeed, while I can check up on the news in London through my TV, I can't order a sandwich because the restaurant closed thirty minutes ago. There is no room service either, presumably due to

a focus on 'essential services'. The hotel is pretty full, but I don't expect to come into contact with anyone else. If you placed the 'Do not disturb' sign outside my door (and my credit rating was good enough) I could probably drop dead inside my room with the TV on and nobody would notice. My email isn't working either because my email provider has thoughtfully 'recently completed an upgrade of all services to enhance security and reliability'. Believe it or not, I can't access my email because they have sent me a new password, but I can't access that because I don't have the password to open my email. Brilliant.

If you want a vision of the future, this is a good one. I could be anywhere. In another ten or twenty years I will be able to access every film ever made in any language through the TV. The room will be personalised, too, in the sense that the hotel chain will know where I come from and what I like — so Triple J will be playing on the radio as I enter my room, and decaf coffee and real milk will be in the fridge. The sandwich will still be an impossible request, unless I'm staying at one of the company's premium hotels, but I guess I'll be able to order one through the TV for twenty-four hour delivery. In twenty-five years time I will enter the hotel by placing my finger on a security panel by the entrance, and both the receptionist and the 'girls' will be holograms. I will gain access to my room with my world-phone or the chip inserted in my jaw and be able to customise the room myself to look and smell just like home — but I still won't be able to get a sandwich from the restaurant at 10.30 p.m., and my email still won't work.

Two big trends at the start of the twenty-first century are urbanisation and the increase in the number of people living alone. In 2006, 25 per cent of homes in the United Kingdom were single-person households. In Australia it was 17 per cent, while in the United States single-person households have grown by 30 per cent in thirty years, due to factors such as couples staying single for longer, easier divorces, and longer life-spans, especially for women. We have

also seen a significant reduction in the number of children born and a massive increase in the number of old people. In short, there is a lack of births and deaths, which means that the global population will go into decline around 2050, putting an end to fears of global overcrowding. You can see this already in statistics — 22 per cent of women in the UK say that that don't expect to have children.

Home alone

The growth of urban singles is driving everything from a growth in late-night convenience retailing (for example, buying a single portion of chicken fillet at 1.00 a.m.) to how the tables and chairs are laid out in your local McDonald's. Reasons for this urban renaissance are various.

Twenty years ago it seemed as though everyone was moving out of the cities. In the US the term 'white flight' was coined to describe white, middle-class families fleeing inner-city crime and grime to start new lives in the suburbs. Nowadays the reverse is happening. Known as boomerang migration, singles and childless couples are flooding back into cities like New York, London, and Melbourne because that's where the action is and the commute isn't. Indeed, by the year 2050, if this trend continues, most inner cities will be made up almost entirely of rich singles, wealthy families, and gay couples with high disposable incomes and liberal political persuasions. Rural areas that still exist will be populated by rich hobby-farmers interspersed with down-shifters and digital nomads.

But it's not just the cities that are changing. In 1950, 80 per cent of US households comprised the traditional husband, wife, and one or more kids. Now it's under 50 per cent. The rest are singles and same-sex couples (increasingly with kids). There are also 'blended families' — mother, father, plus two or more children from different relationships or marriages and extended financial families — homes with more than one generation living under the same roof.

In other words, shifts in social attitudes (what is considered normal or acceptable), together with changes in demographics, housing stock, and even retailing are making it easier to live however you like. And for many people this means by themselves. Even if you don't live alone you will increasingly be able to do whatever you want unencumbered by family pressure or practical considerations. This is freedom without responsibility. For example, at a recent new home show in the US, a dream home was displayed that allowed each family member to enter the house via a different entrance. Individuals could watch TV or surf the internet in their own room, and choose separate kitchen facilities and bathrooms, so as not to interact with other family members. And to think that back in the 1980s people were worried about families not eating breakfast together. In the middle of the twenty-first century the problem will be how to get individual members of the family to even talk to each other.

In Australia in 2005, adults spent on average three hours watching TV every day — and twelve minutes talking to their partner. In the US over 25 per cent of two-year-olds have a TV in their bedroom, and children aged two to seventeen spend twenty hours a week watching TV versus thirty-eight minutes talking to their parents.

No wonder the fastest growing reason for women seeking a divorce in some countries is absent (always-at-work or always-working) partners. There is already a growing gulf between the sexes, and this will open up even further in the future as women become more economically self-sufficient. Even when both sexes are together physically, men are usually emotionally somewhere else. Women just want to talk, while men just want women to be quiet. In the future there will be a law passed in Europe that requires married men to be at home by 9.00 p.m. on Thursdays or else they will be fined 500 euros. There will also be tax breaks for people who choose not to live alone, and pet owners will be taxed if the owners live alone as an incentive for people to have children rather than child substitutes.

Of course, there is an irony here. We are increasingly leading separate lives, and in the future it will become much easier to physically isolate oneself from other people at home or at work — which, for some people, will be the same place.

At the same time we are becoming increasingly connected. One of the most popular websites in the UK is Friends Reunited. MySpace (now Rupert's Space) in the US has well over 100 million members and regularly receives more hits per month than Google. Both websites simply seek to put like-minded individuals and groups in touch with one another, but maybe something more profound is happening. To a large degree, the history of the next fifty years will be about the relationship between technology and people. Moreover, there is an inherent instability built into this relationship because technology changes fast and exponentially, while people change slowly and incrementally. What this means, in effect, is that the more technology gets embedded into our lives, the more we will run away from it. As a result, there will be a greater demand for human-to-human physical contact and direct experiences.

There will also be more interest in spiritualism and philosophy — unless, of course, humans and technology are merged together, in which case things will get very confusing indeed.

By the year 2025 artificial intelligence (AI) will have become a reality. In simple terms, this means that when you phone your bank and have a twenty-minute argument about credit-card charges you'll be speaking to a computer without realising it. More spookily, by the year 2050 there will be two highly intelligent species on Earth — traditional, genetically pure humans and technologically aided hybrid humans. The latter will be 'people' who have been genetically manipulated by the insertion of DNA segments to prevent certain diseases or to create certain emotions or personality traits. They will also be robotically and computer-enhanced to improve strength, sight, vision, or intelligence. Again, one will evolve very slowly, and the other will change as rapidly as technology and ethics permit.

Do we want this to happen? Perhaps the question is whether or not we can stop it.

Some people will say that this won't happen. We will understand the threat and pass laws to prevent such enhancements, much in the same way that human cloning is already outlawed. But if history can serve as a guide to the future, it shows us that mankind is curious. Someone, somewhere, legally or illegally, will be tempted to answer the question 'what if?'

In Los Angeles you can already visit a reproductive technologist and choose sperm or eggs based on IQ or appearance: 'blonde hair, blue eyes, and an aptitude for tennis, please'. If you can't make it to LA, you can always order sperm over the internet. And if we are already doing this, it's only a very small step before we add non-biological elements to our children. Given that companies such as Nike sponsor thirteen-year-old soccer stars it's probably also just a matter of time before a company signs up a promising foetus on a thirty-five-year sponsorship deal.

If such experiments simply involved the insertion of technological elements into a human brain or body, this would be almost no threat to the human species. But what if the enhancement involves nanotechnology or computers, and the machine elements really do start to think for themselves? What happens when we produce machines that are more intelligent than us? What happens if these machines develop some kind of self-awareness (consciousness) and become self-replicating? Once that gene is out of the bottle it will be very difficult indeed to put it back in.

OK computer

Our relationship with objects is going to change in the future. In the past, objects were neutral. They were not intelligent and did not possess a state of mind. If they had a personality, it was given to them by their designers and was entirely skin-deep. Otherwise

we imbued personality into objects via our own imagination. This won't be the case in the future. Take children's dolls, for example. Historically these were inert, rather poor representations of the human form. They are already becoming more realistic and more intelligent. Owners of the 'Amazing Amanda' can already chat with their doll, and 'intelligence' is available in the form of facial recognition, speech recognition, and radio-frequency identification device (RFID) impregnated accessories. If you're a bit older (and presumably no wiser) you can even buy a physically realistic, life-sized 'love partner' for US$7,000 from a company called realdoll.com. But you 'aint seen nothing yet.

In a few years' time you will be able to personalise your doll's face (one of your own choice or, more likely, a famous face), communicate with your doll by telephone or email, have real conversations, and experience your entire life history through the eyes, ears (and nose) of your doll. The latter will be achieved by the doll and other linked devices preserving your emails, phone calls, and other images and information captured through its artificial eyes, ears, and nose. In other words, the doll will become a digital storage device with the capacity to document your entire life. The so-called 'life-caching' industry is already worth US$2.5 billion annually. This will in turn give rise to a debate about the ethics of information, because questions will arise as to who owns such information, whether or not it can be sold or traded, and what happens to the information once the 'owner' dies.

Dead, but increasingly not forgotten

In the past, when you died there was very little of you left. One hundred years ago you might have left some letters or drawings. Fifty years ago you may have left some fading photographs. Currently you can seek or accidentally attain digital immortality through video clips, sound files, digital photographs, and emails on your

own website or sites belonging to others. There is even a website called mylastemail.com that promises to send out your last email once you've died and you can even check what date that might be at deathclock.com. But there are already problems. The tragic death of seventeen-year-old Anna Svidersky became problematic recently because she had a page on MySpace.

She is still there, unaware of her fate in the physical world. And because her MySpace page is protected by a password known only to her, the page — her digital afterlife — will stay there, potentially forever. Of course, there are counter-trends. Scrapbooking is phenomenally popular at the moment as a low-fi way of preserving memories and as a way of engaging in physical contact with other people across generations.

It might not be so low-tech either. Some people believe we are presently living in the digital dark ages because most of what we are currently preserving will be unreadable by future generations. I already have a stack of floppy discs from the early 1990s that I can't read, and it's entirely possible that the photographs of my children (4,753 at the last count) won't be readable or printable in twenty years' time.

You think I'm kidding? NASA can't read some of the records of its 1976 Viking Mars space landing, and the BBC can't read the digital copy of the Doomsday Book it produced in 1986 to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the original. Of course, the original paper copy remains perfectly readable.

In the not-too-distant future, everyday objects such as shoes, carpets, and toothbrushes will contain technology that will collect information about us. We will then be able to personalise objects, allowing them to change physical state (like colour) or respond to our daily mood. They will also be able to exchange data with other objects and send information to other people. For example, your toothbrush will be able to analyse your breath, and book an appointment with your doctor if it detects the smell of lung

cancer. In other words, what were once just ordinary objects will be increasingly networked and intelligent. Manufacturers will use the information generated by these smart products to sell us other services or enhance our 'ownership experience' — although whether people will want such a relationship with their toothbrush remains to be seen.

In Japan you can already buy school blazers embedded with GPS tracking technology. This means that, as a parent, you can elect to receive an email or SMS alert when your child arrives safely at school each morning (or at least when the blazer does). This idea is no doubt linked to the rise in paranoid parenting and so-called 'stranger danger', but there will be other services linked to similar products in the future. For example, kitchen appliances will monitor their own performance, and order spare parts and service calls all by themselves — much in the same way that the McLaren F1 supercar already alerts the factory when something goes wrong, thanks to onboard monitoring and GPS tracking.

Equally, ordinary clothes will be able to monitor their condition, arrange for dry-cleaning pick-ups, or alert their owner to new design upgrades. But what are some of the likely attitudinal and behavioural implications of these developments?

At the East Sutton Park Young Offenders Institution and Open Prison in Kent (UK), offenders with low self-esteem are encouraged to do gardening. Even something as simple as raking up fallen leaves has been shown to have an instant effect, delivering instant satisfaction. As twenty-year-old Leah says, 'If I'm angry I dig.' Gardening will enjoy a huge surge of popularity in the years ahead because it will be an antidote to the future. It will deliver the solitude and peace and quiet that will be so lacking in people's lives. It will be a way of dealing with too much technology. Washing dishes by hand and baking your own bread will similarly become popular for much the same reasons. They will provide physical results, and people will feel that they've achieved something by themselves.

One of the consequences of ubiquitous technology is that some of us will unplug some or, in extreme cases, all of our lives. In theory, new technologies will make our lives easier. Things will move faster saving us time and money. Things will also be more reliable. Technology will make things that were previously difficult or impossible easier and more affordable. But history suggests that the opposite is much more likely to happen.

Do you remember the predictions of the paperless office and the leisure society? Between 1999 and 2002 global use of paper increased by 22 per cent and we now seem to have less spare time than ever. We are also sleeping less than we used to — down from nine hours per day in 1900 to 6.9 hours today, and everything from computers to home-loan decisions are getting faster. Indeed, the benefits of the computer age can be seen everywhere except in the productivity statistics, because we are inventing new ways of making ourselves busy.

Comfortably numb

This obsession with 'busyness' can be seen in the way that the work ethic has invaded childhood. Children must be kept busy at all times. As a result, children are becoming over-scheduled, and we are creating a generation that cannot think for itself, a generation of passive citizens and comfortably numb consumers with almost no imagination or self-reliance.

In Japan the word 'benriya' loosely translates as convenience-doers. These are people, usually older men, who fix leaking taps, change lightbulbs, remove cockroaches from sinks, and generally do things that require an ounce of commonsense. In other words, there is a section of Japanese society that is totally incapable of fending for itself.

Another obvious problem is that complex technologies fail. In the past, when things broke down they were relatively easy to fix.

If your car wouldn't start there were only three or four things that could be wrong, each one easily fixable. These days breakdowns are more complex, and chances are you won't be able to fix it yourself. Moreover, as things become smarter and more networked, these failures will become even more catastrophic. The term 'cascading failure' refers to the failure of one element of a network being able to bring the entire network to its knees. If you lose your house keys today it's a problem, but hardly the end of the world. In the future, though, you won't have house keys; you'll have smartcard or biometric entry, and if your card gets lost or the fingerprint reader breaks down it really will be a headache because it will be linked to all the other devices inside your house. So you won't be able to switch on the central heating or make a cup of coffee because the central-heating settings and the coffee machine will have been personalised and linked to individual smartcards for each member of the household or the biometric door entry system.

People will therefore seek out older products with less technology or hack into new products to remove the unnecessary features. In the long term, technology may solve this complexity problem itself, but don't bet on it. A more likely scenario is that companies will keep inventing useless gadgets like internet fridges — and some deluded souls will even buy them — but most of us will stick with what we know. Our lives are complicated enough already, and we won't buy into technological dreams like smart homes until it can be demonstrated that the new really is superior to the old. This means faster and cheaper, but it also means taking into account the bigger picture. 'Does this make my life easier?' as well as 'Does this make the world a better place?' After all, as a very old friend of mine, Douglas Slater, once reminded me: 'Old things become old because they are good. They are not bad simply because they are old.' Door keys, books, and bank notes have survived for centuries because they are extremely well designed for their purpose. Don't get me wrong here: keyless entry, e-books, and digital money are all coming, but

most people will prefer to use the original tried and tested versions for a number of practical, historical, and emotional reasons.

Things cannot get faster or more complicated forever. Our minds (at least our current minds) won't be able to cope — there is only so much information we can take on board. For example, there's a trend called too much information (TMI) that has a distant cousin called too much choice (TMC). In a nutshell, mankind is producing too much stuff. The amount of new information we now produce is estimated to be around 2 billion exabytes annually. That's (very roughly) 2 billion billion bytes or about twenty billion copies of this book. The average large corporation similarly experiences a doubling of the amount of information it produces annually.

It is no longer information that is power; it is capturing and maintaining a person's attention. The problem is so bad that the world's largest bank (Citibank) is testing something called Auditory Display Software as a way of delivering vital information to traders via music because visually based information just isn't getting through.

A Japanese company has already invented a way to move a cursor across a screen just by thinking about it, so ultimately we may be able to send and receive messages telepathically. Will such innovations make our lives better? It depends. Some people will rush to embrace these developments, while others will seek temporary or permanent solitude in everything from alcohol and country pursuits to memory-erasing pills (probable slogan: 'Take one to forget what happened to you today.') There will even be a boom in people buying remote real estate and islands to get away from it all. However, most of us will live somewhere in the middle, or will mentally commute between both extremes.

Hence there will not be a single future because we will all experience the future in different ways; there will be multiple, often contradictory, futures. The future will arrive faster if you live in a metropolis such as London, Sydney, or New York than if you live

in a remote town or village. Equally, the level of change you will experience will vary according to your age, your income, and your occupation, although there will be exceptions everywhere.

New theories of time and space

There will also be tensions generated by these differences. People living in metropolitan areas will tend to push for the rapid deployment of innovations, while older, more conservative rural and semi-rural populations will generally seek to limit them. It will also be a battle between the technology haves and the new Luddites (the technology have-nots and want-nots). The first tribe will tend to have money, but they will suffer from time famine and space anxiety because they won't have either of these. The second tribe, conversely, will tend to have time and space but little or no income, relatively speaking, because this will be tied up in real estate or spent on healthcare costs. So, for example, young people will enjoy very high salaries, but they will be unable to afford the overall standard of living enjoyed by their parents and grandparents because of long work hours, the high cost of real estate, and the lack of private space. What was 'free' to their forebears (fresh air, public parks, public beaches, libraries, roads, etc) will all cost money.

Overall, people will cope — just — with the avalanche of change, uncertainty, and anxiety, but many of them will seek refuge in the past. They will escape the present through various nostalgic pursuits, although their love of the new will sit alongside a fondness for the past.

They will mentally return to the eras they grew up in, which they will perceive (often incorrectly) as being safer, warmer, and more certain than the present or the future. They will covert old cars, old clothes, old music, and even old technology. Again, this is already happening. Just look at the popularity of old arcade video games (Pong), old car designs (the 'new' VW Beetle), old running shoes,

and 'old' food (recipes). Indeed, as people and products become more perfect (humans through surgery and gene modification, products through quality control and innovation), we will seek out imperfect people and products.

Patina will be big in the future. Women with facial lines will be highly desirable, while new hydrogen-powered cars will be available with used-looking paintwork and worn leather seats as optional extras. Another example is pornography. The fastest-growing segment of the pornography industry worldwide is 'real' or 'amateur' pornography using real people rather than airbrushed or surgically enhanced 'models'. In other words porn like it used to be. Nostalgic pornography for the over-seventies crowd? That will be coming along shortly, too.

We will also, where possible, shut the outside world away completely by locking our front doors and turning our homes into either high-security compounds or — more likely — miniature holiday resorts. An interesting fact I came across recently is that the ratio of gated communities to trailer parks in the US is 1:1. People will withdraw into themselves because they will feel impotent in the face of change and believe their lives lack meaning. This will be a problem because if the majority of people withdraw and take refuge inside their homes and inside individual obsessions, governments (and companies) will have carte blanche to behave exactly as they like. To misquote Woody Allen, all that future dictators will need to be successful is for nobody else to show up. The opposite of good isn't evil — it's indifference.

Meet mini-me

For the technically minded, doorbells will disappear in favour of proximity indicators. We will constantly know where our friends and family are thanks to the descendents of services like Friendfinder, and we will be able to screen out the unknown and the unfamiliar.

This will undoubtedly increase our safety, but it will remove the element of surprise from our lives.

Amazon's recommendation software already removes chance encounters with totally unrelated books. Other types of software could do the same with people in the future. This is bad news for society and especially bad news for new ideas, which thrive on social interaction, cross-fertilisation, and serendipity. We will therefore meet more people like ourselves in the future and be protected from people and ideas that are strange or unfamiliar. This is hardly a recipe for global harmony and understanding.

We will also be taking longer baths in the future as an antidote to modern stress, anxiety, and change. However, we will be contradictory. Many of us will embrace natural-looking materials and bath scents rather than the real thing because we will have so little experience of the real thing. Research conducted by the US Taste Research Foundation recently found that people generally prefer artificial smells to the real thing, partly because they are nostalgic about fake smells from their childhood. In the future, fake will thus become more real than real. Any (fake) experience we want will also be available via smart drugs, nanomedicine, and screen-based products, making the real strange and unfamiliar to most people.

The fully wired smart home will thus exist for some, but many of us will reject it in favour of its opposite. David Bowie allegedly once said, 'I spend all day in a recording studio surrounded by technology. When I get home all I want to do is have a cup of tea and touch some wood.' Even those who fully embrace technology (generally the younger generations) will use it to escape from reality. This will mean further growth in fantasy-related industries, ranging from gaming to virtual sex — the latter becoming increasingly realistic and acceptable to a vast swathe of society. People will take virtual vacations and have serious relationships with real people who they never meet in person.

The real will also become virtually indistinguishable from the virtual. Again, some of this is already happening right now. It has been estimated that Everquest is the seventy-seventh largest economy on Earth despite the fact that it doesn't really exist. Gamers are even spending real currency to buy virtual currencies and virtual real estate. In another example of our escape from reality, the top five worldwide grossing movies in 2005 were all escapist fantasies: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Star Wars Episode III*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *War of the Worlds*, and *King Kong*. Why? I'd suggest that if present realities are too much for people, one way to deal with it is to escape into a fantasy world. If we experience another Great Depression I'd fully expect the entertainment industry — movies, for example — to do rather well.

By 2050 Hollywood, the computer industry, neuroscience, and the pharmaceuticals industry will have all merged into one. This will enable people, legally and illegally, to spend days inhabiting what are quite literally (according to all five of our human senses) other worlds — like the films *Matrix* and *Logan's Run*, but for real.

What are the implications of this? First, we will become socially and emotionally inept. Relationships will be originated, consummated, and terminated digitally. A court in Malaysia recently upheld a divorce that a husband sent to his wife via SMS; while I don't think that this will catch on, relationships will undoubtedly become more superficial and fleeting. People will still get together physically, but it will be less common, and they will commit to each other through renewable ten-year contracts downloaded from the internet. Divorce will be even more common (it hit 60 per cent in the US in 2006), but when people do finally settle down they will tend to stay together for longer, more out of fear of loneliness than love in many cases. Virtual adultery will become a reasonable cause for a divorce, although everyone will be doing it.

Second, we will be exposed to more experiences earlier, so childhoods will be compressed, while the ability for adults to

remain 'children' indefinitely will become easier. Indeed, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood will become less distinct in the future. Ten-year-olds will want the same birthday presents, and forty-year-olds and sixty-year-olds will dress identically to eighteen-year-olds. At least buying birthday presents will become easier.

Inventing new types of fear

What will people be running away from in the future? What will we be afraid of in the year 2050? The answer is reality. People will be disorientated and uncomfortable due to the level and speed of change, so they will seek refuge in other places (holidays, books, games, films, and so on). The entertainment industry will therefore become the biggest game in town. Add to this the natural human inclination to see what's next, and you have a society that will refuse to tackle current problems such as debt, education, healthcare, and transport, while simultaneously worrying about things that happened in the past or might happen in the future (such as asteroid strikes).

We will be afraid of not knowing. We will be afraid of things that are outside our control. We will be afraid of uncertainty. Most of all, perhaps we will be afraid of 'them' — people who come from somewhere else, and I don't mean the planet Mars. These fears will drive the accumulation of information. We will crave 'scientific' data on the statistical probability of everything while simultaneously seeking out the personal stories of people, products, and organisations as some kind of faux reassurance.

By the year 2020 people, products, and organisations will have reliability ratings. These will be ratings of honesty, integrity, and transparency created by and available to everyone. You will be able to rank everything from politicians to personal computers based on past claims, actions, and performance, much in the same way that buyers and sellers are currently rated on eBay. Reputations will therefore be actively managed and, in some cases, even traded or stolen.

However, as an interesting counterpoint, it will be almost impossible to maintain a perfect record because everything you say and do and everywhere you go will be monitored and recorded. Secrecy will be history, in the future. People, products, and corporations will therefore be assumed guilty until investigated. This will eventually give rise to the idea of ethical bankruptcy, which will be a clean slate for reputations.

If none of this appeals to you, we will also see the appearance of disappearance. In the future, people will pay professionals to help them disappear. This will be difficult due to the level of electronic surveillance but not entirely impossible, especially for younger people already familiar with the concept of using multiple identities on the internet or for older people who have never existed online. For the rest of us, saddled with credit cards, GPS-embedded mobile phones, and biometric identity cards, it will be just another fantasy.

Many of the institutions and other anchor points in many people's lives, especially in developed western societies, have already vanished or had their reputations eroded to the point where people no longer implicitly trust them. The family, the church, government, business, science, and even the local bank manager have lost or are losing their ability to unite or be trusted. This cynicism and antipathy will continue in the future. People will focus even more on themselves, and a culture of self-reliance — the do-it-yourself society — will emerge. People will live in isolation bubbles and won't trust doctors, hospitals, or pharmaceutical companies, so self-diagnosis and self-medication will become commonplace. In 2050 smart software packages will be available to identify what's wrong with you, and websites like Genes Reunited will offer genetic histories enabling people to anticipate hereditary diseases and defects. You will also be able to hire or purchase robotic surgeons to perform operations in your own home or office.

At this point, you are probably thinking that most of what you have just read is wishful thinking; more science fiction than science

fact. My response to this is simple. Make a list of what exists now and what you are able to do now that didn't exist or couldn't be done fifty years ago. Now add a multiplier to take into account the fact that technology tends to advance exponentially, and you may start to see that the future really is 'out there'.

Having said this, many of the things around today will still be around tomorrow. The basics won't change much. Our basic hopes and fears will be the same. We will still want to be acknowledged. We will still want our time on Earth to have made a difference. We will still want to achieve something, and we will still crave respect. We will also still want to know whether our collective existence is anything more than a cosmic accident.

Like Joyce Vincent, alone in her London apartment, we will still want to love and be loved.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

14 November 2030

Dear Renée

This will knock you out. I'm sending you something I've just found called 'Leaves'.™ It's a new product from Past Toyz in Shanghai featuring a giant biodegradable plastic bag containing real farm-grown leaves that have been hygienically dried and treated with an anti-bacterial agent for 'safe outdoor fun'.™ Can you believe it? Why didn't we think of that? I think you empty the bag in your backyard and play with the leaves. Either that or you can drive that hygiene and order-fixated neighbour of yours crazy by placing a single leaf on his plastic lawn every night for the next two years. I suppose the company did some research with trend-setters and early adopters which said that people in urban areas aren't getting as close to nature as they like. Back in my day leaves grew on trees but the colours weren't manipulated and the bugs were kept in check by other bugs, not chemicals. Anyway, it certainly made me laugh. You can always send it back if the joke is lost on you.

What's next — aerosol dirt?

All the best

Sing

Five trends that will transform society

Globalisation   Globalisation used to mean Americanisation, but these days it means exposure to people, products, and ideas from everywhere. Globalisation impacts on the sourcing of products and services, and on market-expansion opportunities. It also means connectedness and mobility. Everything from countries and computers to gadgets and global banking will be hyper-linked together. In the future, this trend will accelerate even faster, thanks to devices such as GPS, RFIDs, sensor motes, and smart dust (all essentially tiny wireless transmitters and/or receivers of some kind). Hence privacy will all but disappear, but transparency and risk may increase.

Localisation   Localisation (or re-localisation) is a perfect example of a trend creating a counter-trend. Localisation will occur because people don't like globalisation or homogenisation. The European Union will therefore splinter and ultimately collapse. This new tribalism will drive city states, locally tailored products, economic protectionism, and the sale of flags.

Polarisation   The future is an either/or kind of place with most things polarising in some form or another. First there will be multiple futures, some of them speeding up and others slowing down. Some people with embrace technology, while others will reject it. Industrial markets will split between luxury and low-cost options, with access to services like health and education, transport, and security similarly polarising, depending on your ability to pay. The middle class will eventually disappear in most developed

countries, with people either moving upwards into a new global managerial elite or downwards into a new enslaved working (or not working) class.

Anxiety If 'they' don't get you, a global pandemic probably will. At least that's how many people will feel in the future. Trust in institutions will all but evaporate, and the speed of change will leave people longing for the past. This insecurity is to some extent generational, but whether you are eighteen or eighty there will be a growing feeling of powerlessness and a continual state of anxiety that will fuel everything from an interest in nostalgia and escapism to a growth in narcissism, localisation, and tribalism.

Meaning One of the most fascinating questions about the future is whether religion will be a victim or a beneficiary of change. Some people predict that faith will decline because the spread of information will undermine the mindset necessary to support belief. Physics will produce a unified theory of everything and this will destroy old-fashioned superstitions such as religion. In other words, science will become our new religion. I'm not so sure. If science, technology, and complexity become key ingredients of the future, this will drive change and uncertainty. And the more this happens, the more people will seek out safety, comfort, and guidance from religion. This could just lead to an increase in individual spirituality, but I suspect that globalisation, mixed with a general feeling of powerlessness and anxiety, will drive group actions and beliefs. Hence we will witness an increase in tribalism, nationalism, and xenophobia, which at the extreme will fuel Islamic fanaticism and muscular Christianity.