



Holistic Self-Development of a Silicon Valley Geek

by
Blake White

The historical development and social implications of science and technology remain my passion. However, my adult life has been consumed with overly analytical and stressful attempts to win in the high-tech market in order to provide a better life for my family. So, there has not been much spare time to pursue my passion. In order to achieve a better life-work balance and pursue my intellectual interest, *Quantum Leap* provides a framework for my colleagues and I to develop a more holistic worldview, especially as it relates to science, technology and society.

This holistic approach seeks to build upon our careers as engineers, scientists, and business executives and enable a better understanding of the history, belief systems, ethics, and shared assumptions found in the history of the period. We seek to take into account economic shifts, political contexts, class/race struggles, and the critical adoption rate associated with major scientific discoveries and their related technological uses.

Through technology, I have earned a living. However, my life has been a constant search for a breadth of cultural experiences to counterbalance and complement the sterility of Silicon Valley. As such, my business and personal travels have allowed me to see and experience the world, as few others that grew up in a small North Carolina mill town would conceive.

I have seen the sun set over Mount Fuji in Tokyo, been amazed at how close the DMZ is to millions of people in Seoul, marveled at the artistry of wood carvers and back street “jewelry” runners in Hong Kong, stood in awe of the architecture of the Sydney Opera House, and was amazed at how openly a Sydney cab driver casually made racist remarks about Australia’s indigenous people. My wife and I flew in a

helicopter to the top of a Hawaiian volcano and then under a rain forest's waterfall. We experienced brutally freezing temperatures on a glacier outside Banff, drove through the majestic Alps on the Napoleon Highway, and bathed in the warmth of the Caribbean people. I sat with those with great wealth in Monaco and saw first-hand the gulf between the misery of the poor in Mexico City and indulgences of their elite counterparts. History has come alive and my perspective has been broadened by walking the tower steps of Notre Dame, being outraged at the grave robbers who, in the name of science, transported so much Egyptian art and even mummies to the Louvre. While staring at the clothes and weapons in the lower levels of Westminster Abbey, for the first time, I really understood just how long the British Royal family has been in power. I have enjoyed standing by the Fjord in Norway where Vikings once sailed. I struggled to understand the dichotomy between the conservative Dutch who are equally comfortable with a multiethnic population, public drug dealing, legal prostitution, and euthanasia. I felt a chill as I landed at the same Berlin airstrip that I saw in newsreels of Adolf Hitler. I was struck by how I could simultaneously feel reverence and horror in my every nerve, as I stood in Nelson Mandela's prison cell on Robben Island. These have been wonderful life experiences rare to most of the world.

My work has allowed me to advise business and world leaders, such as John Sculley at Apple, Ed McCracken at SGI, Senator Gary Hart of Colorado, the late Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown, and Vice President Al Gore's staff. I have met President Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, former California Governors Jerry Brown and Pete Wilson, Jessie Jackson, Qwame Turre (Stokely Carmichael), presented controversial recommendations on the uses of technology in public education to the Congressional Black Caucus, and twice hosted a delegation of the British Counsel General and his trade ministers.

I have seen the superficiality of the image industry at the Cannes Film Festival, was honored to share with my daughter a preview of the re-release of *Star Wars* in George Lucas' private theater, was treated to a preview of Michael Jackson's unreleased *History* CD by the artist himself in his private LA studio, and attended

the opening of the only US movie studio owned by African Americans – Tim and Daphne Reid’s New Millennium Studio in Richmond Virginia. Along the way, my wife and I have had the pleasure of witnessing giants in the arts, such as Ella Fitzgerald, Cab Calloway and Miles Davis. We saw ourselves change from fans to critics of Joan Miro as we examined a more extensive body of his work.

This is not bad for a kid from the other side of the tracks, whose mother and father had constrained opportunities of the segregated Jim Crow South. The same kid who cowered under the window sill as the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on the neighbor’s lawn and shot bullets through their windows has experienced and influenced more of the world than those small-town extremists will ever know.

Along this fascinating journey, I have seen life’s grim inequities and its glorious potential. Likewise, I have seen technology – that is always devoted to a specific aim – amplify inequities while making the impossible possible.

While the quickening pace of scientific knowledge and its direct (and sometimes consequential) impact have fascinated me since I followed the Gemini and Apollo missions in my youth. My adult career as an engineer and my community activism reinforced a belief that, though science can be neutral, technology is never neutral.

Since technology is the use of scientific knowledge toward a defined set of goals, it always has social implications. In the profit-oriented zero sum game of global capitalism, the winners often use technology to redefine the rules of society in their favor. We have seen 19th and 20th century industrialists redefine wealth and power according to the ownership of machines and the means of production. Today, we are in the throes of an economy that defines success by the ownership and control of information and the tools that access and exploit abstract representations of knowledge. The losers suffer either profound dislocations, an increasing economic gap with its subsequent competitive disadvantages, or at best they become the employees or servants of the new ruling class. Witness the industrial age that

attracted or forced waves of agricultural workers to abandon the fields in favor of centralized factories and witness again today's debates on the "Digital Divide."

Even beyond the market-oriented implications of technology, there have historically been tension, and sometimes persecution, between the discoverers of knowledge and the high priests of the dominant belief system. The burning of the Library of Alexandria by church-directed Crusaders, the inquisition of Galileo, the Scopes Evolution trial, railings against NASA by rural and inner city evangelists in the '60s and '70s, and the furor of the Evangelical Christians and devout Catholics over the knowledge and practice of birth control, are only samples of a long history of suspicion and fear between the religious and scientific communities.

The nature of this tension goes beyond the mere challenge of paradigms. While scientific knowledge can be a challenge to the paradigm, the real threat is based on the potential use of knowledge via technology to undermine and unseat the center of power. That is why the paradigm holders are often the first to co-opt the new technology for their own use. For example, reading and writing were once restricted to royal scribes, high priests and Medieval monks. Today, successful radio and television evangelists ironically rail against the same "evil media" that is "corrupting our youth." New technologies for the masses seem to be evil, until they are adopted by the powerful for their own purposes.

In either case – markets or faith – if anyone is to be adversely impacted by a new technology, it is generally the poor, the powerless, and those of color.

Through the intellectual stimulation of like minds at the Strategic Technology Institute, I hope to use these life experiences and my observations of the lives of others to understand the duality of existence and create a more holistic "end" to the technological "means" that so often dominate life. At a minimum, I will enter the next stage of my life as well rounded, socially aware, and culturally sensitive.

If done right, my colleagues and I might catalyze a whole new approach to technology assessment -- one that considers context and condition on a par with discovery and tools. Understanding the history, belief systems, ethics, shared assumptions found in the literature and history of the period, economic shifts, political context, class/race struggles, and the critical adoption rate or “tipping point” associated with major scientific discoveries and their related technological uses, will allow us to develop an approach to technology assessment that is balanced with a humanist worldview.

This art form can be inherently superior to the sterile analysis of trends typically used by scientists, technologists, economists, and pundits in general. It will take into consideration the untidy emotional and cultural factors inherent in the “ends” that justify the technological “means.” In the process, we will be able to minimize the over-exaggerated differences between technology and ethics, culture and tools.

We may even be able to usher in a new age of complementary thinking styles based on harmony between science and religion, tangible and intangible, fact and faith, optimism and fate.

I invite you to join the journey.

Blake White is the Founder & President of the Strategic Technology Institute, a San Francisco Bay Area network of management consultants and futurists. STI provides technology assessment consulting, corporate development services, and online publishing with a focus on the business and societal implications of emerging technologies. He is also the publisher of *Quantum Leap*, the journal and newsletter of the Strategic Technology Institute and is the author of *The Technology Assessment Process: A Strategic Framework for Managing Technical Innovation*, published by Greenwood Press.