



## Parallel Universes

By: Fabian, Nelson – January 2013

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Many serious physicists believe that reality encompasses an infinite number of parallel universes. As of late, I'm thinking that maybe I've become aware of some of them. Allow me to explain.

If you've read even a handful of my columns over the past several years, you've probably noticed my growing obsession with the future. It fascinates and excites me to think of the future possibilities for environmental health.

This obsession also explains why I brought the highly acclaimed futurist, Tom Frey into the pages of our Journal. I am hoping that his column serves to bring the future to life for many of our readers. The more familiar we can get with the future, the easier it becomes to imagine what the future of environmental health can be. Developing an intuition for the possibilities before us helps us to better understand how our journey into the future could and should unfold.

For our upcoming trip into the future, it's important to know where we're starting from. If we get our starting point wrong, we're likely to build our trip on any number of incorrect assumptions. And depending on the assumptions we hold, trips into any number of different universes are possible. My column will argue that our starting point needs to aim us at a universe that allows for a rich and dynamic professional practice. I will also point out that other starting blocks aim us at other universes where environmental health fares much more poorly. Which universe we end up in depends to an extraordinary extent on our starting point and the assumptions that define it. So let's start there.

Any understanding of our profession's "present" must necessarily include the sobering realization that environmental health is one of many professions that is today being rocked by economic convulsions that themselves are being driven by technology, automation, the emergence of an integrated global economy, the puncture of the real estate bubble and the resulting consequences of severe revenue miscalculations on the part of many communities, geopolitics, and even new models for how companies and governments can work (to name a few!). But blaming our plight on the economy (as most commentaries invariably tend to do) takes us to that same mushy and useless place that troubled couples often find themselves in when they blame the equally amorphous generalization of "poor communication" as the reason for their troubles. "The economy" or "poor communication" doesn't give us anything to grab ahold of and really work with.

If our condition is seen as only a function of the economy, then we're pretty much reduced to hoping that better days will come because none of us have any real power to change today's economic circumstances. And as people smarter than me have written, "hope is not a strategy" for accomplishing anything.

If we are to have any chance of actually doing something that will benefit our cause and profession as it journeys into the future, we need to understand the present in terms of the forces that are causing the economic stresses that we see and feel (and that have led to downsizings, layoffs, and restructurings in our profession and many others). To understand the real drivers of change is to understand how we can adapt, adjust, and even ride these forces in ways that enable us to improve environmental health. The alternative is to simply stand aside and let the fate of our profession be defined by where we crash land after the storm. At least for NEHA, that's not an acceptable option.

Unfortunately, I hear very little about how public and environmental health might successfully ride these forces into the future. To the contrary, many of our leaders seem more inclined to engage in conversations that are hopeless (the economy has changed and we are victims of it and there's nothing we can do about it), self-pitying (we are victims of forces beyond our control and it isn't fair), fruitless (we need to win the political battle and find a way to get our funding increased [ain't gonna happen folks]), or fantasy (we had a good thing going in 1982 and we have to find a way to rebuild the system to what it looked like then).

I maintain that these perspectives collectively point us to different universes than the one I see unfolding before us. By some magic, in these alternative universes, the laws of physics, economics, and politics make it possible to turn back clocks, create wealth from deficits, give people expensive public services for no cost, and impose public policies on large segments of the population who oppose them. That's not the universe that I live in and understand.

The universe that I see is one that is being reshaped by budget deficits and problematic revenue streams, the automation of routine intellectual work (that is displacing large segments of the middle class including many who practice in environmental health), the globalization of the production and distribution of goods and services, the rise of e-commerce, the emergence of "big data" that draws increasing volumes of information from sensors and simulations (which will eliminate the need for many of the inspections currently being done by professions like ours), and the changing nature of employment (as work groups move from formalized structures into increasingly virtual - and less expensive - work environments). And these are only a few of the winds that are blowing us into the future.

Yes, we have been battered by an economic event that has no equal since the Great Depression. And yes, that particular event was caused by several specific factors such as the bursting of a real estate bubble and the overnight disappearance of billions of dollars of personal equity, the collapse of our financial system, the disappearance of credit, and a failure in regulatory oversight. But the full story of what is currently happening out there extends well beyond these oft-cited reasons for the recession. We risk not seeing these other factors at play when we simply (and dismissively) wave our hands and blame "the economy" (whatever that is) for our problems. We also take out of our hands the power

to do something about both our situation and more importantly, our future, when we obliquely define the problem as "the economy." In order to see these other factors and appreciate them for what they are, let's spend a moment talking about one of the fundamental arcs of human history.

From our beginnings, humankind has been driven by an unrelenting quest to improve our lots in life. To put it another way, we've spent an entire history figuring out how to do more for less. This force has been particularly strong in market economies where efficiencies and productivity gains tend to get rewarded with financial gain.

In the exciting book *Abundance*, the authors (Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler) talk about how in the 1800s, going from Boston to Chicago took two weeks and a month's earnings. Today it takes two hours and a day's wage. According to the Cato Institute, just a decade ago, it took 70 employees to sort 35,000 letters in an hour. Today it takes two. Other such examples of finding ways to get more for less and improve the quality of our lives in the process are literally countless. The examples are countless because this is the way society has worked since we first learned to walk.

Matt Ridley is a zoologist who was taught and trained at Oxford. He studies human evolution and behavior. He has a most interesting definition of prosperity. He defines it simply as "saved time." The less time it takes us to do something, the more time we have to do what we want, which is prosperity. (And since time is money, the more time we save, the more money we have.)

In short and like it or not, we live in a universe that drives itself to continuously find ways to do more for less. When one considers the growing capabilities of automation and the employment implications of a global economy and then realizes that they are but manifestations of this quest to find ways to do more for less, it can't be surprising when we hear people like Tom Frey warn us that significant numbers of midlevel routine professional jobs will increasingly be replaced by computer software and machines. And in this universe, no amount of protesting is going to decelerate this primal force. Moreover and especially with the budgetary pressures that are bearing down on governments all over the world today, it's not just in the private sector that we will see changes of this nature play out. Indeed, when government finance officers, city managers, and county administrators talk about new normal, this is precisely what they are talking about.

Not convinced?

Through our new Center for Priority Based Budgeting program, we now have empirical evidence as to what is going on "out there" in community after community in America. Reams of data can be simplified and summarized in one simple story.

For decades, the sacred cow of local government has been public safety (often defined as police and fire). In the past, when cutting became necessary, local officials were quick to confer immunity on these programs. No more!

In this era of new normals, some fascinating things are happening.

The New York Times recently reported that Sacramento's police department has been cut by a whopping 30%+ since 2008. Camden, New Jersey, just closed its police department

altogether, ceding police control to the county. Our Center program is learning that many other communities are courageously unbundling police and fire programs and are eliminating those police and fire activities that don't directly impact public safety.

If communities are cutting these sacred cows - and they are in legions - who in the world could possibly believe that other public service professions such as ours aren't also vulnerable to cuts? And yet, in those alternative universes that many of our leaders and professional societies fixate on, we are led to believe that if we make enough noise and send enough letters to policy makers, our funding levels will increase as if revenues can be created based on decibels and postage stamps. That's neither the way I think our particular universe works nor the way that I would want it to work, if I had the power to make it so. If our profession's future simply depended on an ever-present supply of funding, where would the pressure for innovation and accomplishing more (for less) come from? Where would the excitement of discovering new and better ways for doing our work come from? And where would the drive to improve our skill sets and even learn skills more appropriate for 2020 come from?

And even if we have the chance to do so, would we really want our profession to become known for being separated from that arc of human history that drives humanity to advance through discoveries that enable us to do more for less?

So what is the point of all this?

A favorite quote of mine is that there is no future, there are only futures. Accordingly, we are standing here today looking out upon a host of different futures and universes. (Some physicists argue that every future possibility opens up a new universe.) Some of these universes hold the promise of environmental health becoming a much more daring and exciting profession. Others, unfortunately, point toward downward slides into oblivion at worst or marginal relevance at best.

NEHA members deserve to know that your association has not been using its resources to wage protracted battles against forces that cannot be defeated. Rather, NEHA has been searching for ways to understand and master these forces, all for the purpose of opening up opportunities for you and for the field of environmental health at large. We seek to invigorate the profession with new ideas, skills (the subject of my next column), and even responsibilities.

This is why we have teamed up with Decade Software as we seek to push IT sophistication and capability across this profession. This is why we continue to push the limits with our educational program at the Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition. This is why we're exploring partnerships with other professions as we seek to form multidisciplined teams to tackle problems that are multifaceted in nature. And this is why we have been so energized over leading the profession into new areas of practice that include sustainability, health effects of global climate change, healthy communities, and the built environment.

The bottom line is that we see our mission as being tied up in an all-out effort to find a universe within which both you and our profession can be breathtakingly successful. If we land in any other universe, we will have failed both you and our mission.

And that's as unacceptable as living in a universe without Peyton Manning quarterbacking our Broncos here in Denver!

SIDEBAR

And in this universe, no amount of protesting is going to decelerate this primal force.