

How do we calculate our own impact?

by Mark Pavilons

Once we reach middle age, we tend to become a bit more pensive and perhaps reflective.

While it's true that average human lifespans are increasing, given the advancements in medicine, we still ponder and prepare for the inevitable.

I have interviewed many high achievers and those with a long list of accomplishments to be proud of. I sometimes ask them how they would like to be remembered or what they want their legacy to be.

The answers are varied, but all point to leaving something behind, whether it's a physical thing, movement, way of thinking or concept. They all enjoyed a great deal of success, and in the end, they want to contribute to society and this planet of ours.

Noble, yes. Practical, sure. But why do humans feel the need to affirm their presence or impact?

That's a good question. When one ponders life, just how do we prove that we've been here, and done something of relative importance? Will we be remembered or become lost in the shuffle, in the great paper trail that is the bureaucracy of the afterlife?

I have had the awful chore of cleaning out the abodes of several of my relatives who passed away over the past decade. I will tell you right now, it is a weird necessity that will fill you with all kinds of thoughts and emotions.

For my late uncle, who never had any children, his life came down to a handful of boxes, pieces of furniture, clothes and a collection of knick knacks from his travels. Sadly, nothing remarkable and little of any value.

Sentimental, yes, to him. His apartment was a reflection of who he was to an extent. But a casual observer wouldn't get a real feel for him by just seeing his surroundings.

I knew him well, so when I was charged with packing up his life, I did so with respect, compassion and curiosity. I examined and evaluated each item, wondering about its origin and why he kept it.

The only piece of his I have is a cowboy hat covered in pins, again from his travels. Was he a cowboy? Not even remotely! Right to the end he still had a noticeable German accent, even though he left his homeland at 17. But he wore this hat often as a symbol of sorts, a form of self-expression of his fun-loving nature.

I went through the same exercise for my sister and my parents. Again, the remnants of our lives amount to a handful of mediocre things.

Of course, we are middle class Canadians. I'm sure the estates of affluent, notable sorts would be much different. But, their things would just be more ornate, more elaborate, more valuable. But does art, jewellery, cars and boats reflect who they were? Do the mansions, without their presence, feel the same?

When assets are sold, gone too is the evidence of the person's journey here on earth. Someone can spend a lifetime creating businesses and even buildings, but when they pass away, these things just change ownership, or even get torn down to make way for something new.

We come into this world cold and naked, and go out pretty much the same way.

Not meaning to find fault with the childless couples out there, but I suppose the main way to measure our existence is through the passing of our genes and DNA. Our offspring carry evidence of our entire lineage and that's pretty cool in itself. We're not at the stage of evaluating DNA just yet, but scientists are fiddling with genetics to improve the human stock. Perhaps one day, in the post-apocalyptic future often depicted by Hollywood, we will trade in genes and DNA instead of cash.

Today, environmentally conscious folks talk about a "carbon footprint," the negative impact we leave upon the earth. As we consume precious, non-renewable resources, we deplete the planet of its goodness and so, leave permanent indents in Mother Earth.

We can't erase all the evidence of humankind's existence to date. But can we lessen our impact?

Sure we can. Does that mean we have to erase all evidence of our own lives? The hope is we are extending the life of our planet, keeping it relatively clean for future generations.

Will those future humans care about our efforts or appreciate our sacrifices? Not sure. Given the state of our current affairs, and society's penchant for technological goodies, I don't get a really good vibe.

Our garbage dumps are still piling up despite decades of recycling. We're still overly dependent on fossil fuels and while electric vehicles will one day dominate the landscape, combustion will never disappear. We still have an inordinate amount of weapons of mass destruction on our planet and wildlife continues to dwindle. The global climate is changing.

I can picture the world coming to an end without anyone noticing because they're busy taking selfies or posting on Instagram! It seems little has changed since Nero fiddled while Rome burned.

Again, as our future generations go about their busy lives, how will we be remembered? I know how much things have changed in the past 20 years, so I can only imagine what the next 20 years will bring.

So my friends, my only "value" is flesh and blood - my children and one day, their children. Perhaps they will continue to tell stories about our humble beginnings.

Currently, there is some evidence of our lives on the Internet and those personal collections on the shelves at home. There are a few Facebook records. But when the Internet is one day completely purged, all of that will be lost.

When we move on, as we all must, our possessions will seem trivial, and dispersed accordingly.

Maybe we humans were not meant to leave an indelible imprint behind. Maybe we were intended only to rent some space for a short while, pool our resources, give, share and contribute.

It's not too late to get off the hamster wheel and catch your breath!