

Science fiction comes true

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

People in a survey who were asked what they would most like to see happen in the future answered they would like to travel through time.

But we are all traveling through time. That's what we do until the day we die - and maybe even beyond that point.

Of course, that's not quite what would-be time travelers mean, especially the young ones just getting acquainted with the beginning of their lives. People who say they would like to travel through time are actually talking about traveling through far more than a normal lifetime. They are talking about traveling hundreds of years backward and forward like a wandering science fiction tourist.

I understand their curiosity. They want to have dinner with President Abe Lincoln one day and with Hillary Clinton's great-granddaughter, President Mary Bush, the next day.

Actually, such goals are virtually impossible so far as we know. The future hasn't happened yet. There ain't no there there.

But the respondents to the survey are on the right track in wishing for the impossible. The possible is so boring by comparison.

Those of us who have actually journeyed through time for 60, 80 or 100 years have seen some of the wildest predictions of science fiction come true. So why shouldn't we toy with the thought of coming back from a future that hasn't happened to visit a past that occurred before we were born.

The New York Times reports the recent survey by the Pew Research Center and Smithsonian Magazine asked respondents to guess what time will yield during the next five decades. But five decades is a pittance. Millions of us have already done more than that.

Sixty years ago, I was among the many young people of 12 or so years who doted on the popular science magazines that stirred our curiosity. Back in the 1940s and 1950s, those imaginative magazines taught us ordinary people would one day soon be riding rocket-like airplanes to France or Australia or China in a matter of hours.

Radio would grow into flat moving pictures 3- or 4-feet wide, hung on the wall for our viewing pleasure.

Doctors would stop hacking people open with knives and would operate on them instead with a tiny tube inserted into the body cavity through a nostril or a small, discreet slit.

Monkeys would ride rockets to the moon and maybe so would human beings, but we doubted that at first.

One day polio and smallpox and maybe even the flu would take a beating from the tenacity and skill of our bold medical researchers.

Telephones would become Dick Tracy devices strapped to our wrists. And not only could we carry on audible conversations but we could even have tiny little keyboards on the devices where we would type messages to one another with our thumbs.

Nah, on second thought, people wouldn't be stupid enough to send clumsy messages with their thumbs when they could use their voices instead. Surely not all the guesses on the future would come true.

But now that so much of what was once our science fiction future has come true, why not ask people, young and old, what we expect to see 50 years into the future?

The most obvious discovery of new miracles is in medicine. Several diseases are already on the ropes or nearly so - AIDS, Parkinson's disease, and several cancers.

And from the perspective of my 76 years, the most remarkable breakthroughs that are about to happen will include building new body parts from scratch - legs, lungs, hearts, livers, eyes, noses, bladders. Some of our favorite exhausted body parts will be grown in the laboratory and used to replace those old favorites that no longer function for us.

Some of the lesser needs of medicine will also be tended to. For instance, if you have the bad fortune to suffer from the chronic boyhead that denies you the natural, normal manly loss of hair on your mature noggin, be patient. Science will find a way.

And don't be surprised if a safe new growth hormone won't soon be at our service, letting every high school grow its own basketball team of taller players.

Best of all, science may develop replacement skin, letting hasty people be able at last to rid themselves of that tattooed name of the fickle girl who dumped them.

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