

VOICES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

By Michael Ventura

January 21, 2000

To teach high school kids is to look into the eyes of the people who will take your place, the people who will test the worth of whatever you and your generation have passed on to them. You may be testing them today on whatever subject you're teaching, but later they will test you and your kind in a much larger and more significant way, for they are the ones who will pick and choose among your truths, discarding whatever doesn't apply to their personal and generational survival. *That* test is the reason you're all in that room together -- grades and SATs and such are just the trappings that temporarily adhere to what's really going on. So you listen for the strength in their voices and try to cultivate that strength, knowing that already they understand much about this new world that you cannot -- remembering that, at their age, you understood much about the newness of the world that your parents weren't equipped to get. At the same time, they need what you have -- not only your knowledge, but the means by which you've survived, the means by which you've kept heart and mind and soul alive, qualities absorbed more by a kind of osmosis than by anything else. Both teacher and student are trying to sift out the truth in each other, to get past the poses and the requirements and the roles, and to focus on that essential exchange of experience and energy that is the heartbeat of education -- and at the same time you're all just a bunch of human beings in a room reacting to each other, with all the wearing needs and anxieties and agendas and bullshit of any human beings in any room. Everybody in that room wants to be liked, everybody in that room wants to matter, and everybody wants to leave that room more alive and more equipped for life than when they walked in, which is why schools are such highly charged places -- and all this simmers beneath whatever the ostensible subject is, every day. I offer these observations by way of background to an assignment I gave just before the Christmas/New Year's break: to write their impressions of this turn of the century, this entry into another millennium and to the era that will be theirs. I present some excerpts here partly because their commentaries impressed me more than much of what I saw elsewhere, but mostly because I've found that when the young speak for themselves they don't sound at all the way they're presented in the media that seek to exploit them -- and because nothing is more rare today than a forum in which the young speak publicly in their own voice. The age-range represented is from 14 to nearly 18. I've let their occasionally strained grammar stand uncorrected, because through it you can feel the struggle for meaning that is the most fundamental of their concerns.

Joseph Leahy: "It's arriving. At last, the final descent. It's so fucking loud, but no one (at least most) can hear it above the commercials. The anticipation is out of control, like a child anticipating Christmas day only to forget it in his dream and when he wakes it is not there, where he left it, it is here. But this isn't one child, this is the entire collective human conscience. This is colossal. When the entire human race is in the exact same cause/effect situation at the same time, something is going to break. The year 2000 marks this ideal of everyone's present and the reaction of that present. It seems unanimous: Things will be different on the other side of the road. The potential of collective human conscience is huge, enormous, immeasurable. It can barely be comprehended. The potential of one's

being and ideas, thoughts and loves, multiplies by the potential of the entire race -- Humans constitute the world we know, and when all of them unanimously decide to change, it will. Maybe not in the commercialized second we await, but it will. Human consciousness is a large thing to change."

Matthew Richter: "Now realizing the world is fucked, that's half the problem. The other half is to abandon selfishness, greed, and general bad attitude, and do something about it. Problems just don't fix themselves. It takes hard work and determination to do it. Also the biggest thing that is needed is sacrifice. Willingness to sacrifice life and limb for what you believe."

Morgan Teller ["Morgan" seems a popular name in this school for girls as well as boys; this Morgan is female]: "To me the main value of the Millennium is the pressure it places to do something honest. Of all the lives lived on this earth, mine is one of the few around for this day, and there is dire consequence in that -- we must clean house to evolve any further -- science is too inconsistent to rule our lives -- We are at the accumulation of an extremely colorful century. To end it in any sort of casual, dishonest manner, would be a crime against ourselves."

Kara Ford-Martinez: "I guess the Millennium is sort of like death, we can't know what will happen until we die -- The truth will be upon us sooner than we can imagine."

Kandis Gilmore: "Since forever I've felt bogged down by all the technological hype about what I need to become by other peoples' standards. Right now my response is simply anarchy -- to just let all the fabricated pseudo-worlds drop and get down to what's real. But I don't feel that's the challenge or change impending here. A much more difficult and demanding task is at hand -- to keep up with yet then go beyond it, but not to become a part of the dryness while keeping up. That's what I struggle with most right now -- all this academic/college/career temporary load, as well as the commercial/economical bullshit -- It seems very few seem to look beyond the shiny oil slick of the media world to the depths beyond. My hope for the future is that I will see that people care, that they are deep, and want change, despite being very confused. I'm confused myself -- befuddled, really -- on how to make my inner and outer worlds meet, how to harmonize them. Disharmony makes me think I'm one of the sheep. I hope I can look back at the time when the Millennium changed and think, "Wow, I was really a puppet then, I'm glad I rid myself of all those leeches."

Joe Lofaro: "I think that 12/31/99 is going to be the same as any other day and just as many things will change that night as any other night."

Loren Graves: "The course of the next hundred years, as said in the ancient Hopi prophecy, will determine the rest of human existence; that is, how the next century plays out will determine our ascension, or our downfall -- The few of us who remain fearless *of themselves* -- they will make the world -- One of the key figures in our current status is our tendency to flock together, to stay in groups to stay "protected." A group of people all conducting life through imitating each other is a dangerous thing."

Morgan Whirlledge [a male Morgan]: "As we roll over into the next Millennium, what is substantial is our perception of who we are. The question: Are we worthy of our expectations? While this is such a huge feeling in the War Baby generation, those who have shaped this century with most of their lives, it also is an apprehensive gesture to the people carrying the hopes of those who have lived before, the 'kids,' who will carry humanity in its essence into this new era. And since this date holds so much significance, one must feel fear, in looking at so many who hate life. So many people, 'kids,' every day try to escape this monumental pressure, by wasting their lives, hating their lives. They carry the question not just [of] who they are, but who humanity is. Since we are all starting anew in so many ways, fear also lies in what we lose -- It reminds me of a line at the end of *Blade Runner*: "All these moments lost, like tears in the rain."

Kyra Scemama: "I'm sick of metaphors. I'm too tired to feel like a cliché."

Tristan Baur: "The other day I saw a commercial about Nike, and in the beginning it starts in a guy's room and on the wall is a poster: Y2K Will Be OK. When he walked outside there was a war raging. And then it said wearing Nike will save you from the year 2000. Which is a load of crap."

Callie Blake: "2000 is just another year. There's nothing to be afraid of. However -- more often than not people believe false things or situations so much that they, in effect, make them real. If there is a problem with the year 2000, it will not be produced by anything but people taking their fears and making them real." Kapila Baseda: "Everybody is so psyched up about the Millennium, and I almost don't know how to spell the damn word -- When I come back [from a holiday trip], and if everything is the same, I'll just be standing at the aeroport laughing my head off saying *I told you so!*"

Damien Bradley: "I love knowing that I can help the world. I know that may sound a bit egotistical, but I really do believe I have something to give."

Welcome to the 21st Century.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.