The Greater Challenge Ahead

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A Hollywood star made an international call to complain that his chartered flight did not have the correct bottled water, and refused to get on the plane. The agent on the receiving end had just learnt that five Cambodian children he was helping - all scavengers at a dump yard - had typhoid. With this last straw, Scott Neeson left a posh job to found the Cambodian Children's Fund in 2004 (March 2010 issue of Reader's Digest).

The contrast in priorities and lifestyle is stark, and saddening. "Who said the world is fair?", you might counter. In fact, society, capitalist or otherwise, cherish such unfairness, otherwise the likes of Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, Li Yanhong, *etc.* would not have existed, nor worshipped by so many. It is this yearning to rise above others that drives civilisation.

The ecosystem does the same thing, but in a much more brutal manner. It is a constant battle of life and death: overpower, out-hide, out-run or out-poison one another. The strong will devour the weak. Geologic and astronomical events shake things up even more violently, tilting the balance every so often.

On such a scale, indeed, mankind is nothing. We are just a blip in the history of the universe. If we made the right collective choice, we last longer, and perhaps develop sufficiently to dodge cataclysmic events such as eruptions of super-volcanoes, or even the burning out of the sun. Otherwise, we just disappear, to be replaced by another.

Seen from such perspectives, what should we do as engineers? We could choose to dance with the music, join the rat race, and have fun till we drop. After all, everyone has to die, it is just a question of when and how!

Alternatively, we could choose to contribute towards the longevity and quality of our civilisation. This is a messy techno-socio problem. The poor cannot live like the rich without risking disastrous outcomes, yet the rich refuses to have anything less! Engineers must work with scientists, politicians and the masses; but the solution is yet unknown, hopefully not unknowable!

How many chose the easy path, how many even think of the alternative? Our destiny is shaped by our collective efforts and, at the moment, it is not pretty. This is my last piece as the Bulletin Editor, and I leave you with this to ponder and, hopefully, act on. ■

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