

Watt's Happening?

by Don Pettit

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The virtualization of practically everything



Guest columnist Reine Strasser poses with his solar heated home near London in southern Ontario. Engineer, innovator and self-described “corporate

theologian,” Reine shares some big thoughts about our weird and rapidly changing world.

This week we feature a guest column by my long-time friend Reine Strasser, a retired automotive engineer who, when asked, describes himself as a “corporate theologian.” You’ll see why in a minute.

By the way, Reine is heating his lovely rural southern Ontario post and beam home with a combination of wood and solar energy. Solar heaters on his roof circulate hot water into an insulated reservoir downstairs, then it’s pumped through radiant floor heating using an automated control and monitoring system of his own design. Sweet, and it’s been cutting his heating bills in half for 25 years.

Here he waxes philosophical about a world that is changing in the most fundamental ways imaginable, and theorizes on what it all means, anyway.

INK

“I grew up reading and writing in pencil, fountain pen, ball-point, magic marker and printer’s ink. Only game in town.

Today, as I write this on my Mac, in any real sense this document does not exist. It has absolutely no physically perceptual form except via a special ‘viewing computer.’ Switch it off and show me where

those words are. You can't. There is no discernible change in weight, size, or appearance between an empty and a full hard drive, only a status change in the stored bits of data.

Then some eco-terrorist tree-killer hits 'print', whereupon the virtual existence of this tome is given birth in our world of the 'real.' This document can now be read, felt, handed around, spindled, folded, filed, stapled and burned like all the other objects in the familiar, known sensory world.

Despite the convenience, virtual communications are intrinsically cold and impersonal, replete with bland 'selfie' photos, mundane Tweets, spam and online trolls. Cutesy emoticons don't cut it either.

Contrast an email with a loving, perfumed, hand-written page, inserted into an envelope and personally licked by the sender, arriving in your mailbox. Human warmth and affection are collateral damage, casualties in our pursuit of speed."

PICTURES AND MUSIC

"Last century, silver molecules were used to chemically record a genuine miniature of your camera image. You could see the actual photo on the celluloid film, point to individual frames and know the exact location of that image as a tangible object.

Now images are stored digitally: a house of cards consisting of those familiar zeroes and ones stacked millions at a time. Let's call such a stack a JPEG, an encoded pattern completely invisible to the eye.

Audio CD's and DVD's store music and movies in the same way. I can see the telltale rainbow pattern on a 'written' disk, but I am not remotely able to discern whether it is white noise, music, a video game or ten million people's addresses, social security

and phone numbers. It is unseen and untouchable, existing by faith only in our collective minds."

MONEY

"I used to go to Stinky Davis' variety store as a kid, carrying an armful of empty pop bottles and receive a handful of pennies: solid copper, coin of the realm. Then at the other counter, trade my physically palpable wealth for a Boodle Bag of assorted candies.

That was a real, manly transaction, as was my father's little brown pay envelope he brought home every Friday night. Coins would roll out from the bottom to make an exact balance. In every sense, my dad "brought home the bacon," a man, by his own hand, manifestly providing for his family.

Today, ones and zeroes down a high-speed data line deposit your pay cheque. The brown envelope is gone. The cash in the envelope is gone. So has the satisfaction and empowerment of a man handing his wife cash for groceries. A subtle, chilling shift that I call 'Emasculation by Virtualization.'

And what about that retirement nest egg? Do you know where your money is? It's out of your grasp, 'safely' stored somewhere out there in the cyber cloud. Not a comfortable thought.

Can the day be far off when one goes to Home Depot for a bag of grass seed and pulls a \$50 bill from his wallet, whereupon the cashier asks, 'May I see some I.D. with that sir?'

Ya gotta wonder, what goes next?"

I think I can answer your question Reine: ENERGY.

Next week in *Watt's Happening* I'll look at how solar power is virtualizing energy and causing another massive, ultra-fast change in our mind-set, but in this case it's probably a good thing.

***Watt's Happening?* Quick Fact:**

ALBERTA TO HOST WESTERN CANADA'S LARGEST SOLAR FARM: *EDF Canada is planning to build a 60 MW solar farm near Carmangay, Alberta, about 150 kilometres south of Calgary. It would be in operation by 2019 and would feature 170,000 solar panels, the largest such facility in Western Canada.*

