

*Diabologic: Change Your Mind*

by Frank Dolinar

"Are you sure you won't change your mind?" the human scientist asks Spock.  
"Why?" responds the Vulcan. "Is there something wrong with the one I have?"

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Two years ago, I discussed the Edge annual question, "What is your most dangerous idea?" This year's question is "What did you change your mind about in 2007?" One hundred and sixty-five answers were received on topics like: computers, spirituality among robots, Darwinian reasoning, what really killed the dinosaurs, mathematics, evolution and biological diversity, human language, physics, and whether we are alone in the universe. The submissions for 2008 are as brilliant and controversial as ever.

According to the website ( [www.edge.org](http://www.edge.org) ) -- "The Edge Foundation, Inc., was established in 1988 as an outgrowth of a group known as The Reality Club. Its informal membership includes some of the most interesting minds in the world." Its mandate is "to promote inquiry into and discussion of intellectual, philosophical, artistic, and literary issues, as well as to work for the intellectual and social achievement of society."

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Among the names of this year's contributors were several whose names I recognized (and you might), some I have read, and even a few I have actually met. Included in the names I recognized were:

Alan Alda, Mary Catherine Bateson, Gregory Benford, Stewart Brand, David Brin, Richard Dawkins, Esther Dyson, Freeman Dyson, Brian Eno, Daniel Hillis, Alan Kay, Ray Kurzweil, Leon Lederman, Steven Pinker, Rudy Rucker, Paul Saffo, Roger Shank, Lee Smolin, Sherry Turkle, and J. Craig Venter.

I've read a number of this year's essays. In doing so, I have discovered that for the intelligent and thoughtful people who wrote them – philosophers, artists, scientists, musicians – the process of changing one's mind is much more a gradual and deliberate process than one of snap decisions. While the realization that one's position had changed came in 2007 for most of them, the process had taken years, or in some cases decades, of study, learning, correspondence, and contemplation.

Take, for example, the essay by psychologist Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, who has come to the conclusion that we probably are alone in the universe. His journey to this conclusion took place over four decades, from his time at Cornell University as a colleague of Carl Sagan to the present. Humans have, as yet, found no evidence for any life anywhere else in the cosmos. Unless or until such life is found, Seligman asserts that he has come to realize that life here on Earth is precious and that any threat to it is a much worse problem than we have believed before now. He closes his essay with the statement, "It means that we have a job to do, a mission that will last all our ages to come: to seed and then to shepherd intelligent life beyond this pale blue dot."

There is James O'Donnell, classicist, cultural historian, and Provost of Georgetown University, who discusses how his view of history has changed. As we have acquired new data – a growing collection of artifacts, identification of climate change from tree-ring dating, and genetic analysis, among others – we have also gained new and better ways to evaluate this data. We have also gained new insights from a slowly growing body of documents from that era that are being translated. As we learn more, understand more, and find reason to re-evaluate our perception of historic events, O'Donnell says, "The excitement begins when you discover that the past is constantly changing."

Then, there is Alan Alda, actor, writer, director, and host of the PBS series "Scientific American Frontiers". Alda's essay is titled "So far, I've changed my mind twice about God". He explains that he was a believer until about the age of 20, subsequently becoming an atheist and then an agnostic, because of the lack of any scientifically admissible evidence for or against the existence of God. He says the following: "The most striking thing about the scientists I met was their complete dedication to evidence. It reminded me of the wonderfully plainspoken words of Richard Feynman who felt it was better not to know than to know something that was wrong." Alda goes on to say, "I still don't like the word *agnostic*. It's too fancy. I'm simply not a believer." And also, "At first, this seemed a little wimpy, but after a while I began to hope it might be an example of Feynman's heroic willingness to accept, even glory in, uncertainty."

Steward Brand, the founder of the Whole Earth Catalog, cofounder of The Well, and cofounder of the Global Business Network has decided that *Good Old Stuff Sucks*. His point is that the best of old (aka traditional) products and technologies are good but don't – indeed can't – hold a candle to the best of modern technologies. He comments, "I bought a sequence of wooden sailboats. Their gaff rigs couldn't sail to windward. Their leaky wood hulls and decks were a maintenance nightmare. I learned that the fiberglass hulls we'd all sneered at were superior in every way to wood." He then follows with, "Sticking with the fine old whatever's is like wearing 100% cotton in the mountains; it's just stupid."

Brand notes that caution suggests he should worry about everything new because of as yet unidentified hazards. But he concludes – in a comment reminiscent of SF author Theodore Sturgeon – that, "The handwringers should worry more about the old stuff. It's mostly crap. (New stuff is mostly crap too, of course. But the best new stuff is invariably better than the best old stuff.)"

If you've never heard of these people, consider entering some names into your favorite search engine. Given the few names I recognized, there were – of course – many more that I did not. For me, that was incentive to read what they have written and to learn who they are. Two years ago, when I first encountered the Edge website, I came to know the name of Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, who is now on my list of recognized names and people to follow.

We have been given 165 personal conversations with respected intellects of our time, each of which attempts to answer the question. All available online at [http://www.edge.org/q2008/q08\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/q2008/q08_index.html). These essays discuss each writer's past positions, what caused them to change their minds, and why. I commend them to your attention.

Here is an opportunity to understand that you can choose to change your mind.

And keep the change.