

Perspectives

By Paul Hosford

Painting tomorrows

My grandfather's twin brother Raymond was a successful artist and illustrator. His talent appeared early in his life -- in grade school a teacher asked him to draw a horse on the chalkboard. The accuracy of his depiction astonished her. When she asked how he did it, he replied "The horse was already there -- all I had to do was draw around it."

In my last column, I mentioned my wife Lori had commented that despite all the problems we currently face, there's "so much potential" for building a better future here. I closed that column by saying "the road to the future always begins with a vision of the potential it holds.

Allowing ourselves to see that potential, though, is often the hardest part." Visions of the future are very much like artists' visions; both are recognitions of potential, things which are there but for the effort to make them seen by others, like the horse on the board. The challenge to all visionaries is how to "draw around" their vision, how to make their vision's potential real.

There is great freedom in being an artist. An artist can create whatever he wants. And there is a similar freedom in creating upon the canvas of the future. We can, like the artist, shape our futures however we want. But just as the artist must work within the constraints of his medium, we have to navigate the constraints of the future. And while many of those will appear unexpectedly, some can be foreseen.

We can see, for example, that our climate is changing. We can see that our energy costs are only going to rise -- it isn't a question of "if" we'll run out of fossil fuels, it's a question of "when." So as we paint upon the canvas of the future, our designs will have to adapt to the challenges and constraints woven into that canvas' texture.

Albion is currently working on its ten-year planning process, a process that requires us to take stock of our potential and envision ways to realize it. Like my uncle Raymond at the chalkboard, we are literally outlining what we wish to create -- a prosperous, sustainable future.

The most fundamental factor in our sustainability may well be our relationship to our environment, an environment that can either help us or hurt us depending upon how we interact with it. When properly managed, the environment of the Great Plains, though harsh and extreme, can provide an incredible bounty of crops and livestock, underpinning our economy. Improper management of the land has for eons, however, been a contributing factor in the death of civilizations around the globe.

The environment offers other benefits as well, benefits we tend to take for granted. As we approach Spring, who hasn't felt a strong urge to stop working and just go outside and enjoy the warm weather, listen to the returning birds sing? No matter how far removed our daily lives become from the outdoors, human nature needs time spent in Nature.

Both the quality of our economy and the quality of our lives depends on a sustainable relationship with our environment.

Lori and I have recently become acquainted with eco-architect and UNL professor Martin Despang. Martin is a remarkably creative and visionary person, a person who understands that for communities to be truly sustainable they must adapt to their environment. Martin and his students are designing homes, businesses and public buildings that work with Nature to both improve the health of their occupants and drastically reduce energy costs.

Just as our understanding of the soil allows us to sustain our communities through agriculture, a better understanding of our environment, the potential of the sun to warm and the wind to cool, will help us sustain our communities in times of dramatically rising energy costs. Martin and the University are a good reminder that as we seek to realize a vision of a greener community, there are a lot of wonderful resources available to assist us.

Unlike the artist's canvas which will remain blank unless acted upon, the future will paint itself without concern for our wants and needs if we don't take an active role in setting our course to tomorrow. As we do pick up our brushes and begin to create, let's remember that our canvas already has a landscape painted upon it and envision ways we can fit our contributions into the "bigger picture" -- our environment.