

Over the last few years, many people have been busily converting stored information—photographs, tax returns, old home movies, etc.—to digital format and storing it securely and eternally on compact discs, CDs, if you will. Recently, however, some researchers at a major university have warned that we should not expect such long-term integrity because the information on CDs fades away in a few years or, at most, a few decades. They believe that the laser inscription on the CD surface is fading away as the material of the CD deteriorates.

My years-long investigation into time and time-related phenomena leads me to conclude that these scholars have mistaken cause and effect. The fading of information is not causing our knowledge of a moment in the past to become fuzzier; instead the increasing distance from that moment in the past causes the past itself to become fuzzier and, of course, reduces the available information about this moment in the past. Only the present moment is fixed. Just as the present we are now experiencing can lead to many different future outcomes, i.e., we “never know what tomorrow may bring”, we can also never know the past that led to the present moment.

This historical indeterminacy affects genealogy particularly strongly. If it appears that your seventh-great grandfather had no parents or several sets of parents, this may be true. Just because John and Mary were his parents at one time doesn't mean that they were for all time. Many of our worst genealogical puzzles could be solved if we would just accept historical indeterminacy as a fact of life.

An understanding of the indeterminacy effect may be valuable in other cases also. For example, your spouse insists that you promised way back in March to get the bathroom painted by October, you may well be correct when you don't remember any promise or you remember the promised date as December. Even if, tomorrow, he or she finds a note on the calendar in your handwriting stating “Finish bathroom before Halloween.”, this note may not have been there the previous day, and, even if it was there the previous day, no one can know with certainty when it appeared. It is also possible that both you and your spouse remember correctly; you just came to the present moment through different paths.

I believe that politicians have had a gut understanding of the indeterminacy effect for a long while. Many of us remember promises that elected politicians made as candidates, but the politicians themselves never seem to remember those promises.