



How Long has this been Going on?

As most of the readers of these stories know, I took on a long project some years ago, spending a full ten years on a single set of prints - my Hyakunin Isshu series. I learned many things during the course of the project, but perhaps the most far-reaching for me was that I developed a solid understanding of a quite long time span ... ten years.

Most people have a pretty good idea of how long one year is; from new year to new year, or birthday to birthday, we experience the cycle so many times that we really come to 'feel' how long a year is. In my case, as a result of my slow and methodical pace through that series, I know what ten years means.

Is it possible to grasp longer time spans? I think so ... I recently became a grandfather, and seeing my own tiny baby daughter grow up and become a mother herself has given me a better understanding of how long a human generation is. And of course my own parents can play this game better than I, having had quite a head start!

But when we jump to far larger time scales it gets much more difficult to understand what they mean. Science textbooks explain to us how mountains are formed and then slowly eroded, over periods of millions of years. An illustration showing the evolution of some species or other may carry a caption describing a time scale of hundreds of millions of years.

What on earth do such numbers mean? Can I ever grasp their reality, in the way that I can feel 'my' ten years? When you consider that I won't be here for much more than a hundred years (at most!), the answer to that question I suppose has to be 'no', but I did have an experience the other day that gave me a small insight into the situation.

Sadako and I were out hiking with friends, and our path led along a mountain river among tall sequoia trees. I can guess what you are thinking, "David was deeply impressed by these tall and very old trees, and now thinks he can understand a thousand year span!"

Well, no. I was deeply impressed by those trees - as anybody would be - but my 'moment' came as I walked away from the other people for a few minutes, and stood alone by a waterfall.

The river swept over a rock ledge at this point and plunged about 3 metres onto rocks, where the smooth sheet of water shattered into a spray of foam amid a thunderous roar. I wanted to get as close as I could, so I stepped out onto a flat rock that jutted into the water just at the base of the fall. I couldn't sit down, because the stones were too wet, so I just crouched there for a while, feeling the power of the water.

And what power there was! It's easy for me to write the words 'the ground was shaking', but it was astonishing to be enveloped by the roar while feeling the ground vibrate under my feet.

As the minutes passed, I started to become disoriented - the cascade of water moving across my field of vision gave the impression that I was moving upward; the constant vibration made me feel unstable, and these combined with the deafening roar to blot out all sensation from the 'normal' world.

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>

I started to feel the very earth being eroded and washed away. Although I certainly couldn't see it happening, I could clearly feel the rock being scraped away under that churning water, grain by grain by grain ... I had the same feeling that we have when standing in the shallow water on a beach and feel the waves swirling away the sand from beneath our feet. If I didn't move, and quickly, I would be eroded away along with everything else around me!

I stepped back from the water and a minute later rejoined my companions, but as we all continued walking along the trail, I tried to hold onto the feeling that had come to me next to the waterfall, and tried to grasp how this entire valley had been created by the force of the water, eroding the stone grain by grain over so many long years. I can't pretend to you that I really do understand it deeply, but at least now I believe the stories from the science textbooks ... it really could happen that way.

Maybe my next printmaking project should be something that will teach me more about this ... do you think perhaps I should maybe shoot for a thousand years?

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>