

By José Luis Cordeiro

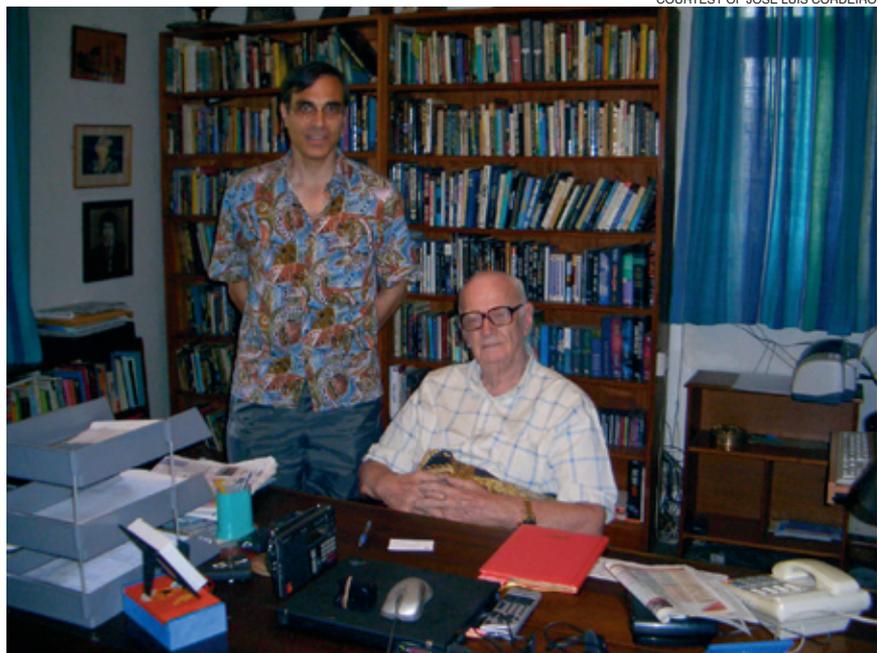
Tribute to Sir Arthur C. Clarke

Before his death in March at age 90, Sir Arthur C. Clarke greeted many visitors from around the world. Among them was Venezuelan futurist and transhumanist scholar José Cordeiro, who here recounts his meetings with Clarke in Sri Lanka.

Like many people, from the very young to the very old, I was fascinated by the ideas and writings of Sir Arthur C. Clarke. He was a very prolific writer, with close to 100 books and more than 1,000 articles. He was also involved in many ways with the film industry, from his landmark *2001: A Space Odyssey* with director Stanley Kubrick in 1968 to numerous documentaries about space and the future. An inventor and a futurist who met presidents, popes, and entrepreneurs alike, he was also a longtime member of the World Future Society's Global Advisory Council.

On December 16, 2007, Clarke had "completed 90 orbits around the Sun," as he would say in his famous Egograms, and a special video was prepared by his personal assistant, Nalaka Gunawardene, for the Internet. Clarke's thoughtful and witty *90th Birthday Reflections* video became an instant success on the Internet. In it, he said that he had "no regrets and no more personal ambitions," but expressed three wishes for humanity:

1. Evidence of extraterrestrial life, since he always believed that we are not alone in the universe: "ET, call us!"



COURTESY OF JOSÉ LUIS CORDEIRO

Sir Arthur C. Clarke (seated) hosts author José Luis Cordeiro in Sri Lanka in 2004.

2. Cleaner energy sources for the future of civilization, here and beyond Earth.

3. Lasting peace, both in his adopted Sri Lanka and in the world.

He also explained that "I want to be remembered most as a writer—one who entertained readers, and,

hopefully, stretched their imagination as well."

Clarke liked the number three, and his Three Laws of the Future helped to make him famous. He started with just one law in his 1962 book *Profiles of the Future*. The second law was initially just an observation that was

“Superman” of Futurism

On March 18, the Foundation named for him reported with quiet dignity, “After a prolific and esteemed career, Sir Arthur has passed away in Sri Lanka.”

Best known as the author of the short story on which the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* was based, Sir Arthur C. Clarke was both an inspired writer and a source of inspiration for others.

In a poll of futurists for the *Encyclopedia of the Future* (Macmillan, 1996), Clarke was ranked sixth of the 100 most influential futurists in history—ahead of Jules Verne and Isaac Newton.

He was an early supporter of the World Future Society, participating in its first conference, purchasing books about the future from the Society’s specialty bookstore, and ultimately joining its Global Advisory Council.

Society founder Edward Cornish noted in his series on the Society’s founding that “Arthur C. Clarke not only joined but sent in a membership for Stanley Kubrick, the producer/director of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.”

Described as a “prophet” for the space age for his inspiring stories and meticulous scientific perspective, Clarke was one of very few science-fiction writers equally gifted on both the science side and

the fiction side of the genre.

He was also modest; he demonstrated a graceful integrity when he wrote a letter to the editor to THE FUTURIST to correct another author, who had inadvertently credited him with “inventing” the solar sail—a sun-powered spacecraft he described in his story “Sunjammer.”

Clarke could justifiably be described as the Superman of futurism, and not just for his longevity against extreme physical challenges. According to newspaper obituaries, he had suffered from post-polio syndrome for the past two decades, succumbing to respiratory ailments.

But his forward-looking spirit led him to “predict” in his 1999 book *Greetings, Carbon-Based Biped!* that he would celebrate his one-hundredth birthday as a space tourist, one of the first guests in the Hilton Orbiter.

In that regard, Clarke’s goal-driven life calls to mind that of *Superman* star Christopher Reeve, who set a goal to walk again by age 50 after the riding accident that paralyzed him. The decision to strive for a goal is, in many ways, a more heroic act than achieving it.

—Cynthia G. Wagner

called a law by others, but then, in the 1972 edition of *Profiles*, Clarke added a third law, rounding out the Three Laws of the Future:

1. When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.

2. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.

3. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Clarke often joked that Newton had three laws, and so three were also enough for him. Additionally,

his friend and colleague Isaac Asimov, with whom he sometimes competed, had his Three Laws of Robotics. However, in the 1999 edition of *Profiles of the Future*, Clarke added an additional law: “For every expert there is an equal and opposite expert.”

Days before he died, Clarke reviewed the final manuscript of his last novel, *The Last Theorem*, co-written with American author Frederik Pohl and expected to be published later in 2008.

Meeting Sir Arthur

To meet Sir Arthur C. Clarke in person was a real pleasure and an

unforgettable experience. One could feel his genius and imagination when talking to him, listening to him, seeing him, reading him.

After setting up a satellite connection to contact him, I had the pleasure to talk to Clarke several times, and he invited me to visit him in his home in Sri Lanka. We met in 2004 and 2005 in his “Ego Chamber,” which is decorated with many artifacts, from the dinosaur age to the space age. Here are excerpts from our conversations.

José Cordeiro: What do you think about the future?

Arthur C. Clarke: As others have said, the future is no longer what it used to be!

Cordeiro: What do you think about religion?

Clarke: Religion is the most malevolent of all mind viruses. I am afraid to be struck by lightning one day while saying this. *[laughing]*

Cordeiro: Do you think that there might be an afterlife?

Clarke: No, I don’t believe in an afterlife.

Cordeiro: Do you believe in reincarnation?

Clarke: No, I don’t see any mechanism that would make it possible. However, I’m always paraphrasing J. B. S. Haldane: “The universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it’s stranger than we can imagine.”

Cordeiro: What do you think about physical immortality?

Clarke: I have written a lot about it in my books. In fact, in *Profiles of the Future*, I wrote that we might conquer death by the end of the twenty-first century.

Cordeiro: Are you writing a new book?

Clarke: Yes, I have been working on *The Last Theorem*. I have written over a hundred pages. It is about Fermat’s theorem, which a young British mathematician, Andrew Wiles, proved over 300 years after Fermat. It is quite fascinating that something simple took so long to prove.

Cordeiro: And are you also writing a book about science fiction?

Clarke: Well, *The Last Theorem* is science fiction, in a sense. But what is science fiction? That is a good question. And how is it different

from fantasy? My definition of fantasy is something which we would like to happen but it can't in the real world, and science fiction is something which we would like to happen and it probably will.

Cordeiro: Have you revised your famous laws of the future?

Clarke: They stand as they are. Some technologies were pure magic only 20 years ago, and they are reality today, just like your digital camera and recorder.

Cordeiro: Would you like to add a new future law now?

Clarke: No, I don't think so. Has Newton added any new laws?

Cordeiro: Do you believe in the accelerating pace of technology?

Clarke: Yes, my best example is the CD-ROM. It is my favorite example of the first law. I still remember the first tape recorders we had years ago. Another incredible example is mobile telephones.

Cordeiro: Are you familiar with the NBIC (Nano-Bio-Info-Cogno) idea?

Clarke: It is quite possible that there will be a convergence of several technologies in the near future.

Cordeiro: How about nanotechnology and space elevators?

Clarke: I have talked about Carbon 60 (C₆₀), Buckyballs, and Fullerenes that can be made commercially and



In 1971, Arthur Clarke (center, left) made an unannounced appearance at the World Future Society's First General Assembly as a show of support for the new future-oriented organization.

will make travel to space cheap. Bucky [Buckminster Fuller] was a good friend, and the last time I saw him was in this room.

Cordeiro: How much would it cost to go to space with such new technologies?

Clarke: It will cost nothing to go into space.

Cordeiro: No cost at all to go into space?

Clarke: Well, OK. Just \$100 to go

up, but you could get a refund on the way back! [laughs]

Cordeiro: When do you think that this will happen?

Clarke: I will give you the same answer that I give everybody. Just a few years after everybody stops laughing!

Cordeiro: In 1999, you predicted clones by 2004. What has happened?

Clarke: Well, it was only a guess, but some people have claimed that it

Edward Cornish Remembers Fellow WFS Member and Futurist, Arthur C. Clarke

Sir Arthur C. Clarke played a key role in the founding of the World Future Society and was a member of the Society's Global Advisory Council at the time of his death.

During the 1960s, I happened to read his remarkable book *Profiles of the Future*, which carefully assessed the possibilities and impossibilities of the human future. I noticed that he had dedicated this book to his "colleagues in the Institute of Twenty-first Century Studies."

I wrote Clarke inquiring about the Institute, since I wanted to make contact with other people interested in the future. Clarke responded that there was no such Institute in reality. He was simply

referring to his colleagues who shared his interest in the future.

His kind letter got me thinking about the possibility of establishing an association for people interested in the future, and that led about a year later to the founding of the World Future Society in October 1966.

The first regular issue of the Society's magazine, *THE FUTURIST* (January-February 1967), featured Clarke's book *Profiles of the Future*, and by the end of 1967, the Society was selling not only that *Profiles* but also other books about the future to Society members. Clarke turned out to be the Society's best customer. His books had to be care-

fully shipped half way around the world to his home in Colombo, Sri Lanka, but the Society's staff was delighted to provide him with this service.

When the Society held its first conference in 1971, Clarke told me he couldn't be listed on the program due to an agreement with his lecture agency. But he came unannounced and participated actively in the conference.

Clarke maintained a lively interest in the Society through the rest of his life. He was a good friend and an inspiration to us all.

—Edward Cornish, founder of the World Future Society

has already happened. In 1999 it seemed like a reasonable guess; it may be even an accurate guess, and we don't know yet.

Cordeiro: How about your 100th anniversary in space?

Clarke: Absolutely in 2017.

Cordeiro: But do you really plan to celebrate in space?

Clarke: Well, it depends on my health. I am suffering from post-polio syndrome.

Cordeiro: How do you feel physically?

Clarke: I am doing fine except for the post-polio syndrome, which means I can't really walk anymore and I have to sleep 15 hours per day.

Cordeiro: Will some future technology be able to cure it?

Clarke: Some doctors have worked on some electrical stimulation in paralyzed babies. I am quite sure someday that stimulation will overcome such problems.

Cordeiro: What do you think is the greatest achievement of humankind during the last century?

Clarke: We have finally traveled outside the Earth, we have gone to the Moon and beyond. We are now able to leave the cradle in our planet.

Cordeiro: And what do you think is the greatest failure of our civilization?

Clarke: We have traveled to the Moon and then we stopped. We landed on the Moon in 1969 but only a few years later abandoned it. We should continue!

Cordeiro: Which is your own favorite book?

Clarke: That is a difficult question. Maybe *The Songs of Distant Earth* (1986) and then *Childhood's End* (1953).

Cordeiro: Do you believe that there is life in the universe?

Clarke: I think it is quite common. Probably even Mars had life before!

Cordeiro: But how about really intelligent life?

Clarke: Sure, and the proof is that they are not here! The best proof that there's intelligent life in the universe is that it hasn't come here.

Cordeiro: When will we make contact with them?

Clarke: Well, we are still searching for intelligent life here on Earth. Who knows? Who knows? I mean, it could

be tomorrow! I don't believe it has happened because people could not keep quiet about it.

Cordeiro: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of humanity?

Clarke: I believe one should be optimistic because there is a chance of a good self-fulfilling prophecy. It is dangerous to be pessimistic because that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, but a bad one. However, one should avoid being naïvely optimistic.

Cordeiro: Do you think that time is linear or cyclical?

Clarke: Everything that can happen will happen. There are billions of universes proliferating everywhere.

Cordeiro: So, do you believe in parallel universes?

Clarke: I don't "believe," but it is a possibility since in a practically infinite universe almost anything is theoretically possible to happen somewhere.

Cordeiro: And, some of those parallel universes could have cyclical time?

Clarke: Yes, yes. In one of those universes I shoot you now, you see, and we end this interview. *[laughing out loud]*

Cordeiro: Fine, I get your point. Thank you so much for your time, and live long and prosper.

Clarke: Good luck, and thanks to you.

That was a witty way to say that the time was up. Clarke never lost his British sense of humor. After we met, we stayed in touch, and Sir Arthur even invited me to visit his scuba-diving resort in southern Sri Lanka (which was badly damaged during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami). While he could, he loved floating underwater while diving, which he believed was close to the feeling of weightlessness in space.

The Biggest Big-Picture Thinker

Sir Arthur C. Clarke was a lover of both outer space and the deep water; a student of both the past and the future. He believed that we are not the end of "creation." In his view, life is an integral part of the universe and will continue to evolve. We have to

carefully transcend ourselves, or we will finish the way of the trilobites and dinosaurs. Just like other earlier life-forms are history today, humans might be history tomorrow.

In 2005, I organized a major international conference in Venezuela about the future of humanity, and Clarke accepted to be a keynote speaker. Unfortunately, because of his health condition, he could not travel from South Asia to South America, but he agreed to have a live videoconference during TransVision 2005: Towards a New World. Due to technical problems, however, we had to settle for audio only, but Clarke spoke brilliantly, with hope and optimism for humanity in the long term. He reminded us that many future prophecies are self-fulfilling, and that is the reason why we have to be positive about the future. I asked him a final question: "If you could tell people one thing, just one thing, what would that be?"

"Don't panic!" was his brief and sharp answer.

I think that he was right. We have to avoid panic and keep building a better future, carefully, here and beyond Planet Earth (or Planet Ocean, as he liked to say). The time of humanity's childhood is ending, and our "Carbon-based biped" species should mature into a higher, post-biological level.

Sir Arthur, we Earthlings will always remember you as one of our great prophets of the future. Hopefully, we will meet again in 3001, but far beyond our little cradle, and in a much more advanced posthuman civilization. After all, that is the year of 3001: *The Final Odyssey*, when one of the original astronauts of 2001: *A Space Odyssey* comes back to life after cryopreservation in space. In the meantime, remember: Don't panic! □



About the Author

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