

Richard Slaughter Radio Interview with Neville Glasgow
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Hello I'm Neville Glasgow.

Today we're going to explore something vital to us all – the future, or to be more exact the study of the future. A recent visitor to New Zealand was Dr Richard Slaughter, author of many books on futures studies, and Director of the Futures Study Centre in Melbourne. As he explains it, futures studies is not so much about predicting or prophesying the future, it is understanding the alternatives and making informed decisions in the present. One of the things that is happening in the world of rapid change that we live in today is the breakdown of many of the values and beliefs which have previously helped to give meaning to our lives and to the society in which we live. Science and technology appear to have marginalised religion. The human spirit seems to have been impoverished by what one writer calls 'the chill wind blowing from the future'. 'Few' he says 'have the courage to proclaim that as we make our own future we have only ourselves to blame'. Fewer still, and Richard Slaughter is one, go beyond that to find hope where others see only despair. Dr Slaughter says his life as a Futurist began with a boy's comic called '*The Eagle*'.

Richard

The first page of '*The Eagle*' was a brilliantly illustrated strip by a British artist called Frank Hampson, and the character he created was 'Dan Dare.' Dan Dare was modelled on a British fighter pilot except his universe included Venus and Mars, with many strange and interesting characters. What Hampson did was to create a compelling, many-layered world of the future which included people, technologies and ecologies. It was a wonderful world for the imagination of young people to expand into. So that, I guess, was a door that opened onto the future for me. I saw that the future could be profoundly interesting, not necessarily threatening at all at that stage. Having read Dan Dare for many years I started to read science fiction – children's science fiction – then as a teenager more mature science fiction. Perhaps the first key insight was that I learned that the future was not a single 'thing'. It contained an immense variety of possibilities, some of them terrible, some of them absolutely transcendent. This range of possibility served to undermine the notion of the future as a blank 'empty space.' My relationship to the future became *active* because I saw that there were so many different possibilities.

The other question that arose was, why did so many of those futures contain images of future disasters, of things going wrong? There were robots running amok; earthly catastrophes; alien invasions and so on. So, in my later teenage years I kept coming back to this question ... ‘Why should the future which could and should be so marvellous, be constantly portrayed as some sort of disaster?’ This didn’t seem right. It didn’t add up. And, I guess, it was that which led me to the early futures literature. I was training to become a teacher at Chester College in the UK when I came across a book by Edmond Leach. He wrote the book in 1967 from a series of Reith lectures called *A Runaway World?* Looking back on the book, it’s not particularly outstanding. But I guess I discovered it at the right time. It illustrated to me a dimension of concern that was totally missing from the curriculum that I was getting as a trainee teacher. I began to see that the future couldn’t just be assumed, that there was a connection between the dystopian writings I was reading in SF, the real processes and events that were happening out in the real world. I also began to comprehend the blindness of education systems that were failing to engage with the near-future view; the future that they were ostensibly preparing young people for, but were not actually doing so at all.

Neville

Can I clear up this concept? I gather futurism isn’t a very acceptable word but ‘futures studies’ is OK? From the little knowledge I have of futures studies it seems to be as much about the present as it is about the future. Whereas I always thought ‘futurism’ or ‘futures studies’ (I’m going to use the correct word now) ... I used to think it was about prophesy and very esoteric, and it’s not quite like that, is it!

Richard

Well, there are at least two traditions here. One is that of various forms of divination and prophecy which is very ancient and reflects our species’ need to understand something about the future, all the way back to the Delphi Oracle. But the modern tradition of futures studies really emerged from the large-scale planning that was required for the world wars – the movement of men and materials, the logistics, and eventually the scenarios that emerged out of the Cold War – the strike/counter-strike doctrines of the time. The name Herman Khan is often associated with this type of work. Another factor was the recognition that large organisations (government departments, corporations, businesses) all had to plan ahead. They couldn’t just ‘float down the stream’ because otherwise they’d go out of business or at least they’d make a lot of mistakes. So, the field of futures studies emerged out of strategic planning, scenario building, corporate and military concerns about beating the other guy or getting ahead of the competition. That was in the 1960s.

At the same time a lot of people were stimulated by books like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. They were aware that 'progress' was not all positive; it carried a 'downside.' So that along with the bright promises of wonderful new powers, and bright new technologies there was a hidden price to be paid all along the track. Both the benefits and the costs of technological progress and other processes in the world were leading us out of a traditional, settled, rather easy-going framework, into a world of transformation, change and uncertainty. Hence the future would be very different. So obviously people needed to take an active view of that and begin to take part in deciding such questions as: what exactly are we headed towards? how do we get there? how do we avoid the problems on the way? These are some of the social origins of the modern futures field.

Neville

So futures studies is very much about making choices now, taking into account the implications of those choices? Is it something like that?

Richard

Well, one way to understand this is to talk about the loop of futures scanning. It is a type of perceptual loop where you stand in the present and you cast your 'eye' (or mind) ahead with all the means at your disposal – whether it be trend analysis, scenario analysis, looking at extending various things that are happening, tapping expert opinions through Delphi, or whatever – you stand in the present and you look ahead with one or more of the methodologies available. When that loop returns to the present you try to interpret what it means. Now this is analogous to the perceptual loops in simple day-to-day activities like driving and walking. In Melbourne there is a particularly busy intersection outside Flinders Street station. At 5.00 pm, crowds gather on each side of the road. The lights change and two dense groups of people walk towards each other - but nobody bumps into each other and falls over. The reason is that everyone is using this scanning loop. The loop that operates in everyday life is analogous to the loop of futures scanning that is more carefully and deliberately employed in futures studies. So, while we are always physically in the present, with reason, intuition and other capabilities we range ahead and then bring the understandings so gained back into the present - not just once, but over and over again. The process is constantly iterated and reiterated. In order to function in the present we are constantly looking ahead.

Neville

Does futures studies have a spiritual dimension?

Richard

Well, that's a debatable point because it really depends what area of futures studies you're coming from. I really took exception, during my own doctoral studies in the early 1980's, to the dominance of what I called 'the American empirical tradition.' A number of American futurists were confidently going around the world, diagnosing the world's ills and coming up with a list of things that people had to do such as use less energy, have fewer kids, do this, do that... all on the basis of an unquestioned cultural stance. They took their own cultural stance as taken for granted. 'That's okay we'll move on from there.' The approach that I took was to say that we're all culturally 'situated' – there are presuppositions, value judgements, judgements about all things spiritual, material, physical embedded in a particular culture and you can't really talk about the future until you're really clear about where you are from. So, in my approach, I look deeply into culture as a part of the equipment of anyone, including a Futurist. Part of that process is to recognise that 300 years of industrialism have read out of the picture what many other peoples and cultures have thought to be important. Part of that process has involved the loss of transcendent or spiritual knowledge ... perhaps it's not so much religious as spiritual knowledge. In my view a significant part of the recovery that is possible to help get us out of the debris of industrialism is the recovery of 'the spiritual' and its reintegration into our map of knowledge and our ways of functioning so that spiritual knowledge can play its part in the whole.

Neville

The spiritual has been part of your own personal life, hasn't it, from way back?

Richard

Well, I was brought up in a religious fundamentalist family and I guess I got through the limitations of that fairly early, but it alerted me to the fact that there was something other than the material. For example, in my parents' church people would 'speak in tongues' and somebody else would interpret. There was a layer here of non-rational behaviour which I didn't understand but it suggested that there was something else there. So, when I was older I looked back at that and I found my own way into it which was partly experiential, partly through meditation, partly through reading and reflecting on the world. I came to understand that the spiritual dimension is absolutely critical to the health of any culture. I don't believe in gurus. There are a million paths to the top of the hill (spiritual enlightenment) but without this as an active dimension I don't believe any culture can thrive.

Neville

One of the things that you talk about is ‘renegotiating meanings’ (if I may just use a quotation). You say that ‘the notion that words simply mean what they say and that texts embody a coherent experience or account of the world is a deeply held and comforting one’. And then you turn to ‘renegotiating meanings’. What do you mean by that?

Richard

Well the context of that idea is that Western industrial societies got very confident about what might be meant by such terms as ‘wealth’, ‘growth’, ‘health’, ‘progress’, ‘defence’ and so on. ‘Defence’ is a good example. Does it mean that you actually have to build weapon systems and place them in orbit ready to destroy something if it appears to threaten you? Or might ‘defence’ and ‘security’ have more to do with looking after the planet, providing common security? This is obviously a more recent idea. The point is that, instead of accepting the meanings that are handed down from a particular time and a particular place such as: ‘defence’ actually means ‘offence – getting ready to fight’; if you look at the construction of language and meaning in cultures you find that they are historically derived. The fact that they are socially constructed means that they can also be challenged and re-thought.

The deconstruction phase is often viewed with suspicion because ‘taking things apart’ can seem threatening. But, if you situate the ‘taking apart’ together with ‘the freedom to recreate’, this can be very helpful, very constructive. So, for example, you could challenge the traditional meaning of ‘work’. ‘Work’ may mean ‘I’ve got to get up in the morning at 6.30 am, get on a train and travel with fifty other people, get off at the other end, work in an office, come home again, and that’s my week gone.’ That’s ‘work.’ If you take that as monolithic, if you can’t change it, you’re locked into that system. Whereas, what has come out of some post-modern work, out of semiotics and literary theory, is that meanings can indeed be renegotiated. You don’t have to see ‘defence’ as ‘offence’; you don’t have to see ‘work’ as ‘doing what everybody else does every day’. And that brings a tremendous liberation and freedom because it means that people who feel that they can renegotiate – look at meaning freshly – and not just throw things out the window, but gently take apart things they no longer find useful and then find ways of recreating them in ways that are useful ... this leads to a whole set of options that are usually not even considered. So, it’s putting back in people’s hands *an interpretative freedom* which they may not realise, at the outset, that they have.

Neville

Meanings are both ‘individual’, or rather ‘personal’, and ‘communal’ aren’t they?

Richard

Absolutely, that is why they have to be negotiated. It’s not good enough for me to say ‘I’ve got a new meaning for ‘work’ and that’s what it is.’ I have to say something like ‘I have a new meaning for ‘work’ and I’d now like to engage you in some sort of dialogue or discourse to see if we can meet at some middle ground and shift away from the old towards something else. Can we negotiate something about ‘work’ that makes sense to both of us?’ Therefore, it becomes a communal process. I see this happening individually, and I also see it happening socially. What has happened in the futures field is that some of the leading futures thinkers and writers have tired of describing ‘the breakdown’: the problem; things are falling apart; the world is awful; let’s end it all. They’re tired of such depressive states and the endless rehearsal of disaster which is so common in the mass media. So they shifted their focus in favour of rehearsing possible solutions. I don’t mean ‘airy-fairy’, simplistic solutions. They have a deep understanding of what’s gone wrong, a diagnosis if you will, of the global outlook which then leads on to a wide range of options for doing things differently. So, my view is that the best futures writers offer us new ideas, social innovations, different ways of doing things that we are free to pick and choose from and also to reinterpret. E.F. Schumacher was a great example ... he invented the notion of alternative technology which has been widely applied in poor countries. Hazel Henderson’s work really follows after him. She helped to reconceptualise economics so that economics takes a view of the larger world. In turn, I follow from people like Hazel. One of the things I’m saying is that ‘education is not just about the past ... it’s about the future, and here’s how you can get started.’ So, *creative futurists are offering possibilities to people and to cultures*. We’re not saying that there’s a blueprint that has to be followed - such a thing does not exist. Instead, we’re offering options, interpretative possibilities, practical possibilities, tools of understanding which represent a vast, extended tool kit for reinventing culture.

Neville

The choices that are made are value choices aren’t they?, and the questions then becomes ‘whose values’? I understand that futures studies has particular views about the values of science and technology

Richard

Well, you can’t really group futures studies together as just one thing because, just like any area, there are people in futures who are single-mindedly pursuing the development of particular

technologies. For example, nanotechnology which I think is likely to be so powerful that we should treat it with great caution.

Neville

What is nanotechnology?

Richard

Molecular engineering. The synthesis of materials and machines from the very building blocks of atoms using tiny machines called ‘replicating assemblers’ using proteins synthesis as a model; making things at that level rather than clumping great piles of atoms together as we did in the industrial past. That leads to a series of revolutions in the way that we farm, manufacture, create material, create wealth and so on. There are likely to be major upheavals. So I’m uncomfortable with those futurists who are pursuing the nanotechnology revolution as if it was unambiguously beneficial; clearly it isn’t. So, there are some who are ‘technological futurists’ who believe that the keys to the future lie through increasingly powerful technologies. At the other end of the spectrum you have the ‘soft futurists’ who say ‘hang on a minute ... they key to the future has more to do with ‘the possible human’; human development, than with technical development per se. The actual debate is about how you resolve that ... how you resolve human choices, decision making, creativity, interpretive power, transcendent knowledge with the raw instrumental power of present and future technologies. It’s in that arena, between the two, that much of the debate takes place.

Neville

Is there room for God in futures studies?

Richard

There’s room for God if that is a significant part of your belief system and background. In the sense that, as I said before, the path to the future cannot just be through instrumental rationality, through technology, through power ... the interior world of values, meanings, of transcendent knowledge and spiritually is certainly of primary significance as far as I’m concerned. The word ‘God’, may seem a bit dated to many people, but certainly some sort of generative principle, some sort of transcendent evolutionary power, however you want to describe it, there’s definitely a place for that.

Neville

Futures studies is about hope, I think, isn't it.

Richard

Well, I find hope somewhat ambiguous because ... what is 'hope'? Is it ungrounded optimism? To me, futures studies is empowering, not because it offers me hope but because it offers me a larger picture that I can work with rather than tying me down in a corner somewhere and just delivering everything to my door and saying 'that's the way it is, mate'. Futures studies opens the whole picture up and says 'look there are all these possibilities ... there are these tools and procedures for understanding ... you are actually in the driving seat during this time. You decide what you think is necessary.' So it puts the agency, the choice, the decision making back on each of us; that's what I find so helpful. It doesn't give me hope, necessarily. I mean I wouldn't have the faintest idea about whether all the Futurists in the world, and all the people who support them, will succeed. I have no idea. We could come to the end through some ecological catastrophe any time in the twenty first century because we know that that's what's really under way. So, I don't think hope is the point, as far as I'm concerned. That's a bit 'ungrounded' for me. It's more about really *engaging* with the historical situation that we're in and dealing with it carefully, in full consciousness of what we are trying to do. That's not so much 'hope' as 'reality'. It gives me a sense of reality and involvement.

Neville

But you are saying that we are able to deal with it. In other words, we do have choices.

Richard

Absolutely. Certainly.

Neville

There are those who would argue that we haven't got choices ... that we are merely biological machines. I remember talking to a Cambridge professor who suggested that we're just wonderful, complex robots responding to our environment.

Richard

The notion that we're 'just' anything is a familiar piece of Western scientific reductionism. Reductionism is one of the features of western industrial thinking. It looks at a wonderful complex reality, picks out a bit of it and says 'it's *just* 'x' or *just* 'y''. 'We're *just* feral animals ... that's all there is'. But that kind of view reads out of the picture so much that's critical and

essential to human beings. It foregrounds empirical knowledge, for example. It leaves no place for transcendent knowledge which gives you a different picture of the universe. So, I don't go along with that and I also don't go along with the idea of fatalism. For me, 'fatalism' is fatal. It's self defeating.

Neville

To what extent is futures studies merely a Western concept? Does it take into account eastern society as well?

Richard

It's true to say that it looked like a Western concept at first, but this is so for historical reasons. The US was the first country to modernise in the Twentieth Century. Obviously Britain was the dynamo of the early industrial revolution. But it was the USA that really took off in modern times. Many of the beginnings of the increasingly obvious defects of modernity: oil blowouts, pesticide scares, pollution fears, nuclear worries, etc., originated in the US. So, it's a historically based thing rather than a culturally specific one. What also happened over time is that people around the world in many other cultures - bright, capable people in many different places (not merely Western) also saw what was happening in the wider world and themselves began to say 'we can't just drift with this tide of events. We actually have to do something'.

I can give you a specific example from in Kyoto where a Japanese entrepreneur by the name of Katsuhiko Yazaki had a life-changing Zen experience. The experience showed him that the pursuit of commercial material wealth really was very limited. He didn't want to devote himself primarily to that any more. As a result, he put together an organisation called The Future Generations Alliance Foundation. The people involved weren't that far from Hiroshima so they had a very dramatic and up-close view of 'the problem.' Also, if you fly over or travel through Japan today you can see how totally overwhelmed it is by development. So, instead of just fiddling around with 'the problem' this person went straight into solutions, straight into developing a future generations' perspective, and into funding and pursuing all kinds of constructive activities in the interests of future generations.

So, this should not be seen merely as Western preoccupation ... many of those involved are not even particularly pro-Western, but it's safe to say that they're pro-human. So it seems to me that the underlying impulse driving futures studies is universal. Futures studies can look superficially Western because, due to history and the numbers of people working there the US was and remains in some sense the 'heartland' of futures work. But insightful people everywhere have

seen the signs of the times – east and west, north and south. What is now developing is a wonderfully rich, totally multi-cultural, multi-civilisational dialogue about where we are at the end of the Twentieth Century and where we want to get to survive and prosper in the Twenty-First.

Neville

You are now based in Australia. I don't know how familiar you are with the New Zealand situation but what's going on in New Zealand regarding futures studies?

Richard

Well, I think the same thing. There are people here who understand the tenor of the times, who see what is happening, see the way that we are overshooting local and global limits and clearly understand that the earlier Western worldview with its short-term thinking and addiction to growth is completely unsustainable. We know this. It is fact and easy to demonstrate. So, in New Zealand, as in other countries, there are groups of people who are gathering together and trying to develop a longer view, trying to develop a dialogue or a discourse about where New Zealand should be headed. What exactly would a humanly desirable, environmentally sound, economically viable future look like? There needs to be a great deal of effort put into defining what you actually want to achieve, then you can work back and look at the steps and the changes that you need to get there. The alternative is to just drift down the tide of history. I lived for six years in Bermuda. Bermuda to me was like a laboratory – a small social laboratory of 50 thousand people – and it demonstrated to me what happens if you drift down the tide of history. If you constantly defer the future, what you get to eventually is a present that is increasingly unlivable.