

Thinking his way through the gloom

Catherine Armitage

LUNCH WITH RICHARD SLAUGHTER

It's not the apocalypse but it is time to wake up and act, a troubled futurist tells Catherine Armitage. As he comes into view among the autumn lunchtime crowd at the Art Gallery of NSW, there's nothing about Richard Slaughter to suggest he's one of the world's foremost futurists and a founding father of the discipline in Australia.

Of slight build and wearing a lightweight jacket and casual slacks, the author and educator - whose radical book *The Biggest Wake-up Call in History* sets out the signs of pending planetary collapse and advocates consensual social transformation to head it off - could be just another gent with a little time on his hands, here to catch the Archibald exhibition. Except for a slightly intimidating intensity behind the glasses. And the fact he's clutching a chicken focaccia. This is awkward, because the best corner table in the gallery's fine restaurant overlooking the park has my name on it today and chicken focaccia is not on the menu.

A communication lapse left us waiting for each other at opposite ends of the building. Precious interview minutes have ticked by and he has to catch a plane back to Brisbane. This seems fitting: on the cover of his book, weighing heavily in my backpack, there's a clock at a few minutes to midnight, symbolising his belief that time is running out for the planet. But that's a small joke I daren't yet make. Nor dare I suggest he ditch the chicken. To a long-time analyst of the threat to life on earth posed by profligate consumption, surely such waste is abhorrent? I pluck up the courage to ask a bit later, when he's plucking away at the focaccia, which the restaurant staff are politely failing to notice. Between scoffing tasty mouthfuls of sauted scallops and scribbling shorthand notes, it's a relief to hear it's pragmatism, not principle, that has decided the focaccia's fate. Personal asceticism is not, in his view, compulsory for people concerned for the planet's future, even those like him who believe we are in the midst of, at best, a grave "civilisational challenge".

According to Slaughter, "the whole individual lifestyle angle has been overdone". It puts too much responsibility on heroic individuals. Society needs to decide collectively. But what does he mean by "civilisational challenge", and how did a working-class boy from Portsmouth come to take it up as his life's work?

In 1967, when he was studying for a teaching degree at Chester College, Cheshire, young Slaughter got his first inkling that the earth was headed for trouble at the hands of humans. That year, the British social anthropologist Professor Edmund Leach in the BBC Reith Lectures warned that humans could no longer leave their fate to "God, or Nature, or Chance, or Evolution, or the Course of History, or whatever you like to call it". Decisions with long-term consequences should not be left to "bewildered amateurs" but taken by "men who understand what they are doing".

Two years later, the newly married young teacher took his wife to live in the "mid-ocean paradise" of Bermuda. "Initially I was overjoyed. Wow, coral reefs, it was all fabulous." But he gradually became aware of "an unfolding tragedy, where most of what was unique and special was being destroyed in the name of development". In Bermuda, he picked up the lifelong hobby of birdlife photography. Being "close-up to these magnificent creatures" reinforced his sense that humans are part of a community sharing the "rich wider world" with other living beings.

On moving back to England in 1975, Slaughter undertook a PhD in education and futures studies, then a very new academic discipline. Almost 40 years later, it remains at the edge of the mainstream: it still requires explanation. Paraphrasing Slaughter, from his book: Humans naturally practise personal forward thinking. They constantly plan and make big and small decisions, from what time to get up, what to do today or next week, to how much to save, when to marry and so on. They base their planning on what they have learnt about action and consequences to make a best guess about what's likely to happen in the future, taking risks into account as best they can. Professional futurists - or "foresight practitioners", Slaughter's preferred term - do the same thing but on a scale of systems, from local or enterprise scale to national or global in scope.

As people become open to the "signals" being generated within the global system and realise their importance, they actively respond to them. A deeper, richer understanding emerges and, from that, new and renewed values, motivations and capacities can emerge. It's logical, but extremely difficult. Wholesale societal change is a big ask when life seems to be going along well enough without it. Slaughter was dismayed to find on graduation that "no one wants a freshly minted futurist". This was to become a career theme.

He found a home of sorts in academia, starting with teaching short courses at the University of Lancaster. An invitation to Australia to address a conference on educational futures in 1986 led to his moving here two years later in expectation of working for the government's Commission for the Future, which had been initiated by the then science minister Barry Jones in 1984 and was eventually abolished in 1998. But a job didn't pan out. Slaughter spent five years lecturing in futures studies and social education at the University of Melbourne before he was asked to set up the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University of Technology.

After Swinburne, Slaughter moved to Brisbane with his second wife, Laurie, and set up a consultancy, Foresight International. He continues to write and distribute futures-related text materials and another book is on the way. The Wake-up book, published in 2010, summarises and adds to the canon of the "literature of warning", spanning 37 books from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) through to Jared Diamond's *Collapse* (2005) and Clive Hamilton's *Requiem for a Species* (2010). Number 38 presents the familiar mounting evidence for humankind's impact on the environment - species extinction, natural resource depletion, oceans acid or plastic, and so on.

An "unprecedented period of upheaval and structural change lies ahead", according to Slaughter. On the plus side, it's not inevitable that we fall all the way to the "depths of a new dark age within a ruined and debased world", popular as that may be as a plot for a novel and video game. But "the only way forward that makes sense is to seek clarity on what we are facing and mobilise as a society on a global scale to deal with it", Slaughter writes. It's an alarming message and an unpopular one. Writing the book was a "struggle: because he could not find a publisher, so had to self-publish and sell it through his website. Its length, density and uncompromising conclusions make it far from an easy read. He is "profoundly frustrated because of the relatively small numbers of people who will ever see it".

Staying optimistic "gets harder all the time", Slaughter admits over coffee. With visible effort he repeatedly brings the conversation around to what he calls the "benefits of waking up". "It is not the apocalypse. It is just a challenging outlook that I believe we can grow to deal with." But in the book he acknowledges it requires an "act of faith and belief" to imagine that humanity still has time and the will to rise to the occasion.

Meanwhile, Slaughter recycles and composts as much as the next guy and tries to live as local a life as possible. When he travels he travels big, to visit his grandchildren or accept a rare invitation to an international conference. "I think that is part of the answer, bring back our focus to where we live and the people there that need our attention."

But a much bigger question for society than whether individuals lead a deep green lifestyle is "whether commerce operates to manufacture demand to create waste", he says. "It has to be social decision-making to reduce the driving forces that create the unsustainable lifestyles."

So what would he like to see in the morning news that might restore his optimism? The futurist's shoulders slump. "I think I have given that [game] away. So many times in my career that I have wanted it to happen and it has never happened." We're down to the last mineral water and it's time he left for the airport, so I'm pushing him. No, really, I say. What would you really like to see as a sign your career has been successful?

"What I would really like to see is the federal government to pick up on work that has been done elsewhere and get a world class capacity for environmental scanning and strategic foresight embedded in Canberra," he says.

"That is a vacuum I would love to see filled."

Life and Times

1945 born in Portsmouth

1968 teaching degree Chester College

1969 marries Jill, sons Rohan (1977) and Lorien (1979);

1969-75 teaching in Bermuda, first book *Birds in Bermuda* published

1982 PhD in futures studies and education, University of Lancaster

1988 moves to Australia

1989-94 lectureship in futures studies and social education, University of Melbourne

1999-2004 establishes Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University

2000 marries Laurie

2004 returns to Brisbane and establishes Foresight International

2012 publishes *To See With Fresh Eyes — Integral Futures and the Global Emergency*

The Sydney Morning Herald, 28 April 2012, page 8.