

# Futures Studies as a Quest for Meaning

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## Abstract

This article reflects on four decades of activity in the futures arena. Overall, it tracks a process of deepening insight and growing appreciation for the richness and complexity of life in all its myriad forms. Coupled with this is what I have come to regard as our inescapable responsibility for being active in ways that protect and nurture our natural and cultural heritage, both of which are under-sustained and ever-deepening threat. To do so, we need to recover a clear perception of how extreme and “abnormal” our present situation vis-à-vis Planet Earth really is. This entails removing the veils from our eyes, setting aside convenient fictions, and gaining the courage to face reality. This view can also be framed as “finding ways forward in impossible times.” It is a kind of “sub-text” for the kind of Futures Studies I have pursued. Part 1 provides an overview of early influences and experiences. Part 2 summarizes some core learnings. Part 3 provides examples of the kinds of “depth appreciation” that I believe prefigure long-term solutions to the global emergency.

## Keywords

futures studies, global emergency, self-knowledge, limits to growth, coherent vision

## Introduction

For some years a narrative has emerged concerning the post-war baby boom generation. In Australia at least it identifies a sense of relative disadvantage being experienced by later generations in that their life chances appear significantly reduced. This is a question of social justice that deserves to be widely explored and discussed. At the same time, however, a far larger - and perhaps even more significant - issue is that what was earlier thought to be the unstoppable arrow of human progress itself began to falter in the late 1960s and 70s. Two of many possible indicators of this shift are the treatment handed out to Rachel Carson after the publication of *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962) and the emphatic rejection of the first *Limits to Growth* report (Meadows 1972). These, and similar works represented timely warnings that the human species needed to wake up to the

global consequences of its own success. But business-as-usual prevailed, and still does.

As with many others, my career as a Futurist/Foresight Practitioner has occurred as the dimensions of what has become a global emergency slowly began to impose non-negotiable costs upon human societies everywhere. It has been difficult to stay positive, to always be searching for solutions, ways forward. But this is what anyone involved in futures work of any kind must now confront. Hence the search for meaning outlined here cannot possibly be a singular one. It's an unavoidably collective challenge facing all who care about the world

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and are determined to resist its steady descent into chaos.

## Part I: Overview

### View from “Year Zero”

I was born late in 1945, or “year zero” of an era now often referred to as the “Anthropocene” (human era). World population was a little over 2 billion—which is less a third of the present 7 billion. It was the end of World War II and the first nuclear bombs had fallen upon Japan. Cars were uncommon in the terraced streets where I grew up. Television was nonexistent, and telephones were heavy Bakelite blocks with circular dials and long twisted cords attaching the handset to the base. My grandmother’s tiny house was lit by gas. My father walked to work and my mother cycled everywhere. Although Portsmouth was pockmarked with bombsites and damaged buildings, I was spared the rigors of postwar reconstruction. I was simply too young to understand. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, annual GDP (gross domestic product) grew by 4 to 6 percent. Global industrial production tripled in the twenty years from 1950 to 1970.<sup>1</sup> Although it was far from obvious in postwar Britain, humanity was poised at the start of a historically unprecedented period of growth and development. Like many others I have benefited from that process, but the overall costs have now exceeded what anyone could have possibly imagined.<sup>2</sup> While most governments, organizations, and individuals seem to take such vast shifts and changes in their stride, a clear-eyed look at the process suggests that they have bequeathed us a truly abnormal and unsustainable world. Yet nothing of this dire future could be detected in postwar working-class Britain.

Perhaps in response to the grayness of the later 1940s and early 1950s, my parents did all they could to expose me to a range of experiences. They also taught me to read at an early age. It was not long before I became immersed in young peoples’ literature—both fiction and non-fiction. Then, as a teenager with a voracious appetite for reading and experience something started to shift. I began wondering

why “the future” appeared to bear increasingly negative connotations. Much later on I encountered the view that the future might be seen as “a disaster that had already happened.”<sup>3</sup> Leading British science fiction (SF) author Brian Aldiss provided another clue during a 1980s SF convention in Brighton when he described the main ethos of the genre in just four words—“hubris clobbered by nemesis.” I felt that to be a very astute and pointed summation. If, however, you read enough Dystopias—and I was reading many at that time—then at some point your enthusiasm for their warnings and disasters can wane. Something was missing or in some way out of balance. So, unconsciously at first, I began to seek out and explore different options. Eventually I realized that I was being drawn into a *different engagement with the present*. The drivers of Dystopia were not hidden. They were out there in the world for all to see. What might this mean?

I found myself at the beginning of a long period of learning about the world and why it appeared to be under such pervasive—but ill defined—threat. Coming to that view in the 1960s meant that there were few reliable sources and even fewer ready-made guidelines. Without appropriate maps, you basically stumble across helpful material and, from time to time, meet inspiring people. Which is what happened. To put it as briefly as possible, if the Dystopias were an irritant or starting point then Leach’s 1967 Reith Lectures *A Runaway World?* (Leach 1968) provided me with the first real evidence of what was happening.<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, I still have the book. (Leach, 1968)

### Bermuda to Lancaster

Not long afterward I found myself living and working in Bermuda as a young teacher. The six years I spent there provided a further awakening and radicalizing experience that sent me back to study and then into futures. I became friendly with David Wingate, the local government conservation officer. He opened up the natural world to me in ways that had previously been out of reach. Through him I also discovered the work of the early American conservationists—people such as J. J. Audubon, Henry Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and John Muir.

From people such as these I discovered expressions like “In wilderness is the preservation of the world” and the stewardship ethic they embodied. They provided a vital perspective and backdrop to more contemporary material. I was fortunate to discover Lewis Mumford at this point. His well-grounded and historically informed critique in *The Pentagon of Power* (Mumford 1971) became a foundation from which much of my early thinking and exploration would proceed. I still believe that a section of one chapter on “the removal of limits” should be required reading for virtually everyone.<sup>5</sup> It addresses some implications for humanity around the fundamental dilemma of growth and, in so doing, brings much that is contested in our contemporary world into sharper focus.

Bermuda demonstrated in very real and concrete ways what happens when human beings lose sight of natural process and what is now called “the big picture” in pursuit of short-term anthropocentric—that is, economic—ends. Primeval Bermuda had been obliterated under a relentless tide of twentieth century development. I began to see it as a microcosm of a global process. The cycles, characteristics, and limits that apply in nature were and are being progressively marginalized and diminished under the pressure and the weight of implacably growing human demands. Understanding this mismatch between human perception and environmental reality became one of the enduring themes of my life and work. The publication of the first *Limits to Growth* (LtG) study in 1972 brought all this together (Meadows et al. 1972). At last I was ready to get serious about returning to university. At Lancaster I was fortunate to find a program in the School of Independent Studies that allowed people like myself to help design a large part of their degree program. Mine had the rather grandiose title of *Science, Technology and the Human Future*.<sup>6</sup> That’s when I discovered a group of people, and even a few organizations, that focused on alternative futures. I felt I had finally found a home of sorts. Wider acceptance and career “success,” however, would be a harder road and would take many more years to accomplish.

## Australia

In the meantime my wife and I had two sons—a fact for which I am eternally grateful. It is impossible to overstate how important they were and are in the overall pattern of my life. Sadly, however, having completed a PhD on Futures in Education I found that there was no work anywhere in the United Kingdom for a freshly minted Futurist. So it was with a very heavy heart that, after several years of uncertainty and struggle, I found myself living and working in far away Australia. Things here were also tough at first but when I landed a job at Melbourne University I had my first real opportunity to grow and contribute. The five years from 1989 to 1994 that I spent there were among the most productive of my life. I was able to design and teach course units on Futures in Education, develop greater skill at public speaking, and start to publish in professional journals and through mainstream publishers. As things turned out, I was both fortunate and unfortunate at the same time. On the positive side was Professor Hedley Beare who gave me his unlimited support and with whom I collaborated to write *Education for the Twenty-First Century* (Beare and Slaughter 1993). The book was widely read, and its basic message received strong support from the profession. Unfortunately, however, I was also stuck with a head of department (HOD) who actually wrote in a formal assessment that my area, that is, Futures Studies, had only “a tenuous connection with education.” It was not the first clash of paradigms and personalities that I would experience but it was the beginning of the end for that phase. After five short years, I was out of a job and struggling again.

At the time it felt like a disaster. But then, as I found my feet, as it were, I experienced a welcome shift of perspective. A period of intensive in-depth personal work with what might best be described as a “humanistic psychology group” known as All One Voice proved life changing. Much to my relief I found out that I could, indeed, thrive working independently and soon built up an active network of colleagues, contacts, and organizational affiliations. I ran research projects,

edited a professional newsletter, promoted and ran workshops, and dipped my toe into small-scale publishing. During this time I also wrote and edited several well-received books. Perhaps the greatest success was a multi-volume project called the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (KBFS) (Slaughter 1996, 2005). This went through several editions and was rendered into CD-ROM and USB formats that are still used in universities around the world.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout this whole time, I returned to the United Kingdom frequently and my sons visited me in Melbourne. We bridged the huge geographical distance by staying in touch as often as possible. In fact we probably ended up having more “quality time” together than some who live in close proximity. The period of living and working independently lasted for several years. Then in 1998, having just moved to Brisbane, I received a call from my close friend, Adolph Hanich, who had been working at Swinburne University. To cut a long story short, he and I collaborated on a proposal for a new entity there and I was later invited to set up the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI). So in mid-1999 I turned around, went back to Melbourne, and got to work. Around this time I took on the Presidency of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF). This undoubtedly added to the “profile” I was able to bring to the new position. After a year working on course development and accreditation, the first graduate students enrolled in 2000. The local and international feedback was highly encouraging. All up I spent five very active and productive years at Swinburne. At one point—while I was writing *Futures Beyond Dystopia* (Slaughter 2004)—I remember wondering how long I could go on working 6½ days a week! I also left it in the good, strong hands of Peter Hayward when, in 2004, I decided to leave.

I consider myself fortunate to have been able to work in an underappreciated domain of enquiry and action that never, at any time, promised or delivered a conventional career. Yet it has provided me with an uncommon level of satisfaction and overall success. The key thing, however, is not so much what it means

personally but, rather, what it may suggest collectively. For what was achieved during the early years at the AFI was what entrepreneurs call “proof of concept.” That is, we demonstrated conclusively that the domain of Futures Studies and Applied Foresight had multiple uses and applications. Our suggestion that “foresight refreshes strategy” was never contradicted by anyone at all. There is a simple reason for this: it made—and makes—a great deal of human, cultural, and organizational sense.

I will now summarize some of the core learnings that have emerged from my immersion in the Futures arena and, as will become clear, many other fields as well. They are not arranged in any particular order. It should also be borne in mind that what follows is a summary. Interested readers are encouraged to consult some of the sources (many of which are on line) cited below.

## Part 2: What I Have Learned

### *Foundations*

In postmodern conditions some highly influential arguments have been advanced for viewing the world as being in a constant state of flux and social relationships as being fluid and changeable. There is some truth in this. At the same time, however, it is vital to have some reliable points of reference among all the flux and upheaval around us. The world is certainly not static, and probably never was. But we need some things that we can rely on over the long haul. Appreciation for beauty might be one and the love for one’s family another.

Within the domain of framing ideas and beliefs, it is both possible and desirable to have something similar to hold onto. Moreover, Wilber’s four quadrants provide one relatively simple strategy for achieving this. It is based on taking up the notion that the world can be viewed through four “windows” or frames of reference. These are as follows: the individual interior world known only to ourselves; the collective or shared interior world of culture, society, language, and so on; the exterior individual world of measureable behavior and competence; and finally, the exterior collective

world of physical evolution, ecologies, cities, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

I should add here that there are very many sources and resources available to provide us with key understandings in each of the above. For illustrative purposes only I will name four—one in each area—that I have found useful. On the individual interior domain I found Wilber's (2000) work on *Integral Psychology* very valuable. It brings together a great deal of research and practical know-how about developmental states and stages that all human beings pass through and experience.<sup>9</sup> As such it provides a map of the human interiors that helps us to understand different dimensions of the self. This, in fact, is the domain that's almost universally overlooked by futurists as by many others. Then, in the collective interior domain, there is a source that has remained current and helpful over half a century—the *Social Construction of Reality* (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The book reveals a lot about how societies operate and how they deal with the central issue of legitimation. For me this is central to understanding why societies operate as they do. Obviously there's far, far more to say about this subject. But the book nails some central realities that have often helped me to understand aspects of current events. One of them is an idea attributed to Marx, namely that we are indeed the "authors" of our societies but tend to forget our authorship.

It is more difficult to identify a single source to illuminate the domain of the exterior individual. But my choice goes to Joanna Macy (1983) for her book *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, as this shows how it is possible to move from despair toward empowered action in virtually any situation.<sup>10</sup> As such it supports a vital and often overlooked capability during increasingly challenging times. It means that the onset of Dystopia is not necessarily a legitimate cause for depression and despair. Finally, within the domain of the shared exterior world there is, indeed, a single text that, for me at least, outlines a reliable framework that situates human life nested as it truly is within a dynamic global context. It is called *Global Change and the Earth System*

(Steffen et al. 2004) but a subtitle that I have often used is "the story that connects."<sup>11</sup> I have often referred to it when confronted with the complexities, confusions, and denials that are constantly highlighted in the media.

These examples are indeed just that, and I am fully aware that no two people would choose the same sources. Yet a conscious search for their equivalents does, I suggest, provide valuable insight and support for anyone seeking clarity about the world and their place within it.

### Self-Knowledge

During a trip to Delphi, Greece, I saw two ancient inscriptions in the Temple of Apollo. One said "know thyself" and the other "everything in moderation." To which the modern wit may add "including moderation!" Of the two I think the first is most vital because without self-knowledge we inevitably flounder and simply cannot function properly. These days the injunction can perhaps be translated into something like "carrying out personal work" as often as required. Having the right mentors is also helpful here as they not only help resource us for life tasks but also give us that rarest of gifts—honest feedback. Learning to hear and accept that is one of the most vital skills.

As we go through the process of discovering, accepting, and integrating the many layers of the self, so we open to our own partiality, our games, our appetites, and weaknesses. We also become aware of our projections and learn how to take them back. At some point we stop being the center of the universe and realize that we are all merely threads in a vast and ancient tapestry, the boundaries of which lie forever beyond us. From such insights comes capability and modesty. In a futures context this means that we are open to others. We can hear and know them because we have sufficiently stilled the cacophony of ego. The part about modesty is important too. I have long believed that in a field such as Futures Studies and Applied Foresight that deals with such huge, world-spanning issues, it is vital to express ourselves in ways that are clear yet also under-stated.

## Disappointments and Failures

To be a Futurist is clearly not an easy choice, especially if one elects, as I have, to quite deliberately *not* work for the already rich and powerful. Herb Kempf's (2008) book *How the Rich Are Destroying the Earth* and Kerryn Higgs' (2014) superb *Collision Course* have confirmed this decision beyond any possible doubt.<sup>12</sup> This means that one may well choose to forego significant opportunities at, at times, to "hoe a lonely furrow." So it is vital in this context to stay connected to those people and sources of energy and insight that can provide support when it is needed. I do not believe in the "lone Futurist" any more than I do in the "lone genius." *We are all and always part of a collective, whether we acknowledge this or not.* None of us is self-sufficient. When a crisis comes or we run out of personal resources, we need to know who or what to turn to and how to recover. This is very personal and very specific from one individual to another. But it also has a strong bearing on how we can not only view but also *positively utilize* Dystopias and negative depictions of futures. The upshot is that while a conventional view tends to avoid both, I regard them as powerful drivers of human motivation and purpose (Slaughter 2012).

In my own case I have turned to family, friends, mentors, organizations and, occasionally, to the wisdom traditions themselves. Just to take the latter, during my fruitless and frustrating search for work following my PhD I remember being greatly inspired by Huxley's (1946) *The Perennial Philosophy* and E. F. Schumacher's (1977) book *A Guide for the Perplexed*. It's in the latter that I found the proposition that "at the human level there is no upper limit." That is truly inspiring if you are in the mood to accept it. Another example would be when I came across Wilber's (1995) *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* during one of the more difficult periods of my life. The only way I felt I could describe how I felt at the time was to say that I had somehow gained the energy equivalent to a "whole Middle-East oil field." This is an odd metaphor perhaps, but one that conveys something about how I experienced the power and reach of the Integral perspective.

Then there are the words of Seneca that convey an almost timeless wisdom that reaches across the centuries (Seneca, 62–65 AD, trans. 1997).

Of the many hands-on workshops I have attended two stand out. One was called *Imagining a World Without Weapons*. It was based on the work of Elise Boulding and Warren Zeiglar, two giants of the field. They designed a group process that allowed participants to inhabit and "make real" a desired future world. The next step was to return to the present and identify the "seeds" of that world in the here-and-now. This identifies core work that can then be undertaken. The other was held at Manjushri Institute on the southern edge of Cumbria, UK. It was organized and run by Joanna Macy whose work *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* I mentioned above. I shall never forget the Council of All Beings that I took part in during that week. It was a transformative moment. There were many ups and downs but I am certain that the twenty or so people who took part all had life-changing experiences of one sort or another. In my own case, I found new sources of insight and strength that have remained with me ever since.

## Managing Success

It is just as necessary to know how to deal with success as it is with the challenges of getting there. Being successful does not actually make one more important or less likely to make mistakes. In fact success can feed the ego in ways that are counterproductive. It has sometimes been noted that the higher you rise in any organization the less feedback you are likely to receive. Here's where you find "ivory tower" academics, "know all" executives and bosses, and those individuals who are beyond caring about "ordinary" people. Part of the self-knowledge required, therefore, is to stay open, to be alert to the traps of ego and take active steps to compensate for the loss of informal feedback. One way to do this is to ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for informal interactions. Another is to be a good listener and to demonstrate a true interest in other people and what they may have to say. In my own

experience such people have sometimes been surprisingly rare.

Hedley Beare became a mentor and model for me in part because he always remained modest, he sought to resolve conflicts honestly, and he never stinted at promoting and supporting his colleagues regardless of their level in the organization. The success of our book *Education for the Twenty-First Century* (Beare and Slaughter 1993) was due, in no small part, to his standing in the profession, the respect in which he was held by everyone. It was also due to the way we collaborated. For example, we each drafted successive chapters. We then passed each chapter to the other person with a completely free hand to add to, subtract, or rewrite it as required. This led me to suggest in later years that, especially when it comes to writing and editing, there should be no ego involved at all.

To be successful also involves becoming well known. Other professionals, from the media, for example, will turn up more often to ask for your help or your views. You are likely to be invited to take part in radio and TV programs. So, it is worth working on developing some of the necessary skills. One of these is preparation, preparation, and preparation. I've *never* skimped on this because when getting ready for one occasion you are also doing the same for others yet to come. Having prepared well it is easier to relax when you are in the spotlight knowing that you know what you need to know for that occasion.

My best model here is Wendell Bell whom I am proud to know as a colleague and friend. Like Hedley, he has always been generously supportive and encouraging. When we have had the occasional difference of view that has simply been accepted. There has never been any conflict. Sadly I cannot say that for all my acquaintances and fellow workers. Occasionally someone who should know better takes offense at something you may have said or written and, for a while, there is an eruption of quite futile aggression and conflict that is way out of proportion to the issues involved. You just have to get through these periods as best you can, recognizing that they are probably inevitable. But, again, having a

sense of reality, getting out of ego, and learning to recognize “whose back the monkey really is on” can help a great deal (Slaughter 2011a). At the end of the day no one can avoid the “great law of Karma” or simply the view that “what goes around comes around.” Finally I would suggest that the “bottom line” for making the best of whatever success comes one’s way is to embody the spirit of generosity. Or, to put it differently, the best way to enjoy the gifts of a bountiful universe is to respect other people and pass them on.

### *Being Productive*

What this means, of course, depends on what it means to any particular person in a specific context. A former colleague once referred to our field as “an eternal spring of inspiration.” That may be an idiosyncratic view, but it is one that still resonates with me. Part of the reason is that by 1975, the year I left Bermuda, I had started to develop what I can only call an “inner sense” or “compass.” As long as I paid due attention, this became an increasingly reliable guide. I am not suggesting it was infallible, detailed, or provided explicit directives. It was more embedded and intuitive than that. But I have never doubted my life’s direction, and I have never had to search for topics to study, explore, or write about. Over time they just seemed to emerge naturally from the process of living, reflecting, interacting with others, and being aware. My PhD was an exception. It took a year to plan and another three years full time to write. But it taught me a lot about how to think and write about complex issues.

I would be less than honest if I said that I had not enjoyed the occasional comments I have received about being productive. It is always good to be recognized. Yet, at the same time, there are few things that return greater satisfaction than being able to externalize, and find language and action for, the impulses and insights that seem to emerge from within. My goal has always been to try to write/speak/teach about difficult or complex topics in as straightforward and comprehensible manner as possible. Sometimes I have succeeded, others not.

The process of coming to write *The Foresight Principle: Cultural Recovery in the 21st Century* is a case in point (Slaughter 1995). It is hard to describe, but I remember emerging from my collaboration with Hedley Beare feeling that some themes of that book deserved further elaboration. The notions of “foresight” and of “wisdom” seemed to grow and develop over the next year or two and, in a profound sense, to “spark” off of each other. The energy from that process is what enabled me to sit down and write first draft of the book in only a few weeks.

Writing *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History* began rather differently but over time ended up feeling inspirational. Initially, the impulse and drive to begin was very definite and strong but unfocused. Then as I gave more time and thought to the material my way forward became clearer. I had a false start that I became unhappy with and abandoned. Following that the structure of what became Part 1 became clearer. I wrote that over about another year and sent out the draft manuscript to some dozen or so colleagues and friends. The feedback I received was invaluable as I was then able to correct mistakes, re-shape some sections, and add new material. With this completed I found Part 2 much easier to write. It seemed to flow into a logical and achievable structure. Two brief points are relevant here. First, the process of intuitive inner awareness and guidance was central. Second, the eventual work was significantly improved and shaped by subjecting it to external review and evaluation.

The most productive outcome of my career followed from the invitation I received in 1999 to set up the AFI at Swinburne University in Melbourne. The story of how it happened has been told elsewhere (Slaughter 2011b). What I will say here is that the chance to create this organization and then to see it succeed more than made up for the challenging times that I and my family had experienced earlier on as well as the various disappointments that I experienced through what has been a highly “discontinuous” and uneven career. But it was only after I left full-time formal employment that the last part of the puzzle fell into place.

### Part 3: Getting to the Heart of Things

As the first draft of this article was being written, the world was in uproar due to the resurgence of radical Islamism in the Middle East and the emergence of the first large-scale Ebola pandemic. Both singly and together they were seen as threats to the current world order. Yet even then that very “order” was scarcely informed at all by the kind of high-quality foresight capability that I have spent my professional life working on. It is vital, however, to keep on pushing the boundaries and to produce new and original work. Around that time I was working with a talented younger colleague on a special issue of *Foresight*. The topic was that of “Descent Pathways” (Floyd and Slaughter 2014). It addressed the fundamental dilemma that mainstream society and its major institutions have consistently failed to address over the last forty or fifty years (even though they have had many opportunities to do so). That is, the imminent collapse of a global system based on fallacies and contradictions that were becoming unavoidable.

As the early Dystopias made clear, the continuation of heavy trends in the wider world leads to ecocide, a population crash of vast proportions and the disintegration of our world-spanning civilization. Technology, so often cast by Futurists in the role of savior, is only marginally helpful in this context. For example, there is strong evidence that the much-heralded digital revolution has been drastically over-sold and cannot deliver the spotless high-tech future that was promised only a few years ago. While it has led to some useful innovations, its overall costs and very real penalties are far, far higher than its advocates will admit (Morozov 2013; Slaughter 2018; Zuboff 2019). *The real issues at stake in the early twenty-first century are, however, not technical in nature. They are really about who we are, how we see the world and each other and how our needs are expressed and fulfilled.* Central too are the kinds of world-views and values that drive us, and also how we respond to a world slipping ever more deeply into systemic crisis and dysfunction. While many people are focused on the external aspects of this process, the internal and intangible



dimensions I mentioned above are at least as significant. That's why so much of my work over recent years attempts to deal with them (Slaughter 2012).

So far as I am aware I coined the phrase “the dialectic of foresight and experience” some years ago without really intending to. It simply emerged during the process of teaching, thinking, and writing. I and many others have suggested that the human capacity to think ahead, plan, evaluate, and act in future-conscious ways is a gift of inestimable value that can, in turn, be built up into a widespread set of social capabilities. At present, however, it is clear that the “experience” part of this formulation is well ahead. It is far more influential than foresight *per se*. This means that currently we only respond to danger when it is bearing down upon us and few alternatives remain. That this is not a new problem, but rather a deeply embedded and long-standing aspect of human nature, is evidenced by the fact that, for example, Machiavelli discussed it four centuries ago!<sup>13</sup>

I have written extensively about the dangerous prominence of two near universal practices that stand in our way: chronic human denial and future discounting. Yet at the same time I have become aware of a rather different way of approaching—and perhaps changing the nature of—a dynamic that puts our collective futures at ever greater risk. It has to do with removing the habitual filters or blinders that metaphorically cover our eyes, and learning to see more deeply and, I would argue, more productively into the world around us. The suggestion here is that by actively pursuing this path, *qualitatively different readings of the world can be achieved* that support more productive, engaged, and life-affirming outlooks. This is the “last piece of the puzzle” that I mentioned earlier. It can best be made clearer by reference to some brief examples drawn from different areas: music, art, and aspects of the natural world.

### **Music: Chopin, Jazz**

Not long ago I accompanied some friends to a documentary feature on Chopin. I was not sure quite what to expect but was not disappointed. Inevitably, there were aspects of a biopic

outlining the composer's life path. But by far the more interesting sections occurred when several pianists who knew his work well and had played much of it many times over spoke about the music. For most people perhaps, myself included, listening to music is something you might do for relaxation or enjoyment without ever attempting to reflect deeply upon it or render the experience into words. But listening to several people who had immersed themselves in Chopin over a period of years made it clear that there was a deeper dimension that could be known and experienced only if one were willing to put in the time and effort to do so. One might even say that there are multiple dimensions to such music that can be accessed by those attuned to what it is conveying. This brought to mind Schumacher's point about what he called “adequateo” which, simply put, means that there has to be something in the “receiver” that is adequate to that which is to be known. This appears to be a universal principle.

Then, in a completely different context, my wife and I elected to re-play a DVD series on the origins of jazz. We had bought the set some years ago and not watched it recently. This time I found myself becoming more aware of the ways that those commenting on the rise of this type of music were able to understand in some depth what was going on in many of those early performances. Not only that but also how it related to the social conditions of the time. It was not simply a question of creating and identifying new riffs and techniques. The music clearly opened windows to the heart and soul of musicians. Once again, people who had either heard the music live or had immersed themselves in it over time through recordings were able to access deeper layers of meaning and significance than any number of casual exposures would permit. It becomes obvious that music is not something that merely exists “out there” in the form of a series of sound waves and vibrations. It is created from deep within the social and human interiors and is, in a very real sense, “co-constructed” by those listening. If the listening is casual the experience will be superficial. If it is more sustained and engaging, then the experience can be transformed accordingly.

### *Art: Bruegel the Elder's Netherlandish Proverbs*

In Berlin's Gemaldegalerie, there hangs a work by Jan Bruegel the elder that makes very little sense at first sight. On the left is a rather odd-looking cottage with an inverted globe suspended high up on a wall. Behind it there is a field and a small tower next to a river flowing into a distant sea. On the right hand side are smaller and less durable structures. The entire scene is populated by scores of people, most of whom appearing to be carrying on without any reference to those around them. It is also packed with incidents too numerous to describe. There is no clear narrative, so what is going on?

The painting is dated 1569 and nowadays goes by the title of the Netherlandish Proverbs. There is good evidence that Bruegel's intention here was to illustrate what he called "the world's follies"—and there are over one hundred of them on show. There is a man carrying light out into the sun (a futile waste of time), another confessing to the devil (giving secrets to an enemy), and still another casting roses (pearls) before a pig (wasted effort). The entire tableau is nothing less than a catalog of human folly as viewed from Northern Europe during the sixteenth century. Indeed, although the figures are painted with Bruegel's usual attention to detail, they are not individuals as such but, rather, symbolic entities that, like puppets, carry meanings beyond their appearance. This could all be rather dire, except that the artists' dry wit also pervades this display of oddity and perversity. It is the very same humor that led him to paint another scene of Icarus, the boy who flew too close to the sun and fell into the sea. A plowing scene dominates the picture and the eye is drawn to a ship out at sea. Only by close attention can you find a pair of tiny legs visible in the mid distance just as the boy disappears. The world barely notices his sacrifice.

The point here is that read literally such paintings make little or no immediate sense. The Proverbs appear to be a jumble of figures distributed across an unreal, slightly nightmarish landscape. But probe a little deeper and

whole worlds of symbolic meaning begin to emerge. Most of the proverbs illustrated here remain comprehensible four and a half centuries later. They also provide a view into the inner worlds of people and Netherlands culture at that time. To put it briefly, an artifact such as this is a kind of symbolic palimpsest. One can metaphorically "dive into" it and extract as much meaning as one has time and patience for. Much the same can be said for the entire world of art. The pigment on the surface of a canvas is the least part of what a picture can mean.

### *Aspects of the Natural World*

One of the things that kept me sane while living for six years within Bermuda's remote and restricted twenty square mile area was a growing sense of the boundlessness and complexity of nature at different scales. To shift from seeing the islands merely as a convenient "platform" for the usual human activities to seeing it as a node in a vast global system that possessed different characteristics and meanings for different species brought whole new worlds into view. This was particularly true during the yearly bird migrations when uncommon species used the islands for rest and recuperation. By the same token I also realized that, at that time, I had little or no understanding of what occurred each day in a single leaf. Human beings operate in the vast and complex arena between the macro and the micro worlds but tend to become aware of them only when something piques their interest for a time or, more likely, goes wrong. Then, for a brief moment, some little-regarded organism or shift of naturally occurring background forces swims into view for as long as it takes for the crisis to pass. Then it is back to the everyday myopia of business-as-usual. I cannot but see this widely ingrained habit as other than a systemic defect of human perception.

As the years have passed and my vision, my sense of the world, has grown a little clearer, I have come to see "business as usual" as a convenient but highly dangerous illusion. In comparison with all previous times and eras of human history we have to accept, I think, that

the primary fact of our own time is that it is highly abnormal, systemically unstable, and hence utterly unsustainable. It follows that cultural and human habits that may once have been considered “normal” need to be set aside. We can no longer think of ourselves in isolation. We have grown too powerfully dominant for that. Nor can we afford our habitual unreflective recourse to short-term thinking and simple denial. What we can do, however, is to *deepen our sense of the natural world and natural process*. The point is not to worship or idealize them but to reinvigorate ourselves, to refresh our vision of connectedness, of what the world is and what is possible within it. A couple of examples will hopefully make this clearer.

For some years now I have been reading a number of annual “best essays” books. Those from the United States, for example, have helped to sustain within me a sense of what is nourishing and beneficial within that otherwise unstable and contested environment. So it was that I came across an essay by Rick Bass (2013) simply called “The Larch.” I suppose it must be in the region of three- to four-thousand words long. In that short space, however, the author manages to convey a strong sense of what might be called the “true nature” of that species. Furthermore, he also evokes quite powerfully the origins of his own sense of understanding and wonder at this form of life—its role in the landscape, how it grows, how and why it stands tall, how it responds to wind and fire, and how even in its decay it hosts myriad life forms. This is very long way indeed from “tree hugger” romanticism. Rather, it conveys the essence of lived reality, lived experience. Having read this account you could not help but see a stand of larches very differently. Much the same can be said of Richard Powers’ more recent novel, *The Overstory*, that takes a magisterial view of trees and forests in the context of deep time (Powers 2019).

For a second example I turn to a paper presented by James Butler during a Brisbane ornithology conference that I attended in early 2014 (Butler and Muirhead 2014). The paper dealt with the songs of several species of

Maluridae, or Fairy Wrens. These diminutive and brightly colored birds are relatively common along the Eastern coastal areas of Australia and therefore are superficially familiar to many people, myself included. I must confess that, although I have heard it many times, I had never given much thought to the songs of the Superb Blue Wren. A popular field guide describes them as a “vigorous trill, beginning squeakily, but quickly strengthening into a strong downward cascade of louder, less sharp, musical notes.” I had no idea that these songs had been recorded and analyzed. I also had no idea about their complexity, their functions, and the very specific biological apparatus that makes them possible in the first place. Finally, I did not appreciate that the species had been around for at least a million years (Low 2014). In other words, my mind was opened to a whole realm of reality that I had previously grasped only superficially and, in all honesty, not really understood at all.

## **Conclusion: The Purpose of Futures Work**

To summarize, in this quest for meaning I have learned several things. First, our views of reality, on the whole, are too simple, superficial and self-focused. They have allowed humanity to slip into a costly and disturbing trap from which there is no simple or ready escape. This means that within any credible forward view there are very tough times indeed ahead. Over the last few hundred years, Western Civilization has been characterized by a near-exclusive focus on instrumental power and a doggedly utilitarian approach to the natural world. These tendencies have allowed us to misconstrue our place in that world and to overlook the realities and processes that make our lives possible (Slaughter 2010). While economists, corporate executives, and right-wing commentators everywhere like to discourse endlessly about what they call “prosperity,” the truth that they have repressed or avoided is that the global system, or earth economy, is primary. It always has been and always will be. The human uses of that world throughout history are secondary and derivative. As such they are indeed subject

to conditions and limits. Ignoring these is simply an exercise in delusion and self-deception (Floyd and Slaughter 2014).

During the twentieth century, the deliberate and systematic creation of what we now call “progress” looked compelling to many for a while, and particularly during postwar reconstruction. I know this viscerally because, although I was only six years old, I absorbed some aspects of that vision of a better future back in 1951 at the Festival of Britain in London.<sup>14</sup> Yet over my lifetime, “progress” carved out a particularly vicious and destructive pathway. It morphed into an all-out assault on natural systems for short-term gain. Today it operates through a blind and insidious market-led ideology. This, in turn, propagates a form of consumerism that works against humankind’s best interests by liquidating the planet’s precious cargo of flora and fauna in order to sustain itself. Corporate interests in the United States and then around the world successfully embedded ways of thinking and operating that brought vast wealth to some and temporarily higher living standards for others. The world’s poor, of course, remained poor. With calculated deliberation, those same interests undermined and destroyed countless initiatives that sought less damaging pathways into the future. The well researched and, as it happened, remarkably accurate concerns articulated over four decades by the *Limits to Growth* team were pilloried and marginalized. Humanity (or at least some of the most powerful members of it) did not want to know about the long-term implications of exponential growth. So the process of “wild globalisation” continued on its reckless collision course with the planet (Beck 2000; Higgs 2014). Currently, what Zuboff has called “surveillance capitalism,” along with the tertiary economy of financial speculation and manipulation of abstract value, contributes further dimensions of uncertainty and risk.

However, what I have discovered during this quest for meaning is a richer view in which human perceptions are deepened and extended such that they begin to see and appreciate what lies beneath the surface. Music, art, and the natural world are but three dimensions of this deeper reality. There are obviously many more. Each is

effectively infinite and as such have unlimited riches to bestow upon us if only we are willing to slow down and regard them with humility and care. I take the view that looking upon the world with fresh eyes does, in fact, open up new options, refresh and renew our vision, and illuminate pathways beyond Dystopia. Properly understood and widely enacted, such well-grounded visions nourished by depth perception and renewed sources of motivation can move us beyond the present impasse to new worlds of meaning and purpose (Mendonca 2017). One of the most striking and coherent expressions of this view appears in Herman Hess’s (1951) book *Siddhartha* where he wrote that “meaning and reality are not hidden somewhere behind things, they are in them, in all of them” (p. 15).<sup>15</sup>

It follows that the purpose of futures work cannot be to further assist the economic growth machine on its rush to oblivion. Futures work needs to go beyond the humdrum, the conventional, and the search for strategic advantage in the here-and-now. It needs a planetary, civilizational coherent vision. It needs to be transformational in spirit and in deed. We might say that its core purpose is to help us all to live within a deeper, richer, and unbounded present. Within that greatly expanded arena vital projects can emerge, be socially sanctioned and resourced, and take their rightful place. That is to say, for example, that cultural healing, energy transition, and large-scale ecological restoration can finally move from the contested margins. They are all part of a multi-hued and mainstream project to take back ownership of the world for future generations.

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## Notes

1. See Higgs (2014, 111).
2. For example, half of the world's wild animals have been lost since 1970 (Carrington 2014).
3. See Stableford (1981).
4. The cover of this book carries the following words: "Men have become like gods. Isn't it about time that we understood our divinity? Science offers us total mastery over our environment and over our destiny, yet instead of rejoicing we feel deeply afraid. Why should this be? How might those fears be resolved?"
5. See Mumford (1971, 172–5).
6. See Slaughter (1978).
7. See Slaughter (1995, 2005). While revising this essay in 2019, an update of the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (KBFS) supported by the Association of Professional Futurists (APF) and co-edited by my colleague Andy Hines, is finally under way.
8. See Wilber (2001).
9. See Wilber (2000).
10. See Macy (1983).
11. See Steffen et al. (2004).
12. Kempf (2008) exposes the regressive influence of the very rich on less well-off social strata. Higgs details the way that over several decades corporate interests have, in pursuit of their own limited interests, effectively derailed many of humanity's attempts to come to grips with what is now an inescapably dire situation.
13. See his comments about foresight and experience in classical times and in the Middle Ages (Machiavelli [1516] 2003, p. 12).
14. The Festival of Britain "was a national exhibition held throughout the United Kingdom in the summer of 1951. It was organised by the government to give the British a feeling of recovery in the aftermath of war and to promote the British contribution to science, technology, industrial design, architecture and the arts" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Festival\\_of\\_Britain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Festival_of_Britain)). The main location of the exhibition, however, was on a prominent site by the Thames in London.
15. See Hesse, *Siddhartha* (1951).

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