

Wendell Bell – A Personal Appreciation

I first met Wendell Bell in Toronto in 1980 at what was then described as the First Global Conference on the Future. He and I were both presenting at a session on Futures in Education. The contrasts between us could not be greater - I merely a young grad student at the time and he a successful Professor of Sociology at Yale. But he treated me like an old friend and made me feel welcome in what was certainly an unusual environment. As time passed, it became clear that Wendell was indeed one of the giants of our field. Naturally enough, I followed his work and, for some reason, he followed mine as well as that of many other younger colleagues and friends.



Two of his works in particular stand out. One is: *The Foundations of Futures Studies vols 1 & 2*¹ the other is his memoir, *Memories of the Future*.² Signed copies of each are among the treasures of my library. The two-volume 'foundations' set is a rare work of thorough, in-depth scholarship. Volume 1 provides a masterly account of the purposes and assumptions of Futures Studies (FS), asks if it can be regarded as a science and tracks its development from positivism to critical realism. Volume 2 then tackles values, objectivity and strategies for judging preferable futures. I was privileged to read 'Memories...' while it was still in manuscript form.³ It's a valuable book, written with modesty and complete openness. It takes the reader through earlier stages of his life and relates many events, crises, dilemma that helped to form this complex and generous man.

Later on I was able to ask him more about some of the events he'd related. One that took my breath away occurred during his time as a military pilot in the closing years of World War 2. During difficult weather he was forced to land on a tiny island airstrip. As if that were not sufficiently hazardous he realised moments after touchdown that he'd landed in the wrong direction. Another that puzzled me at the time was his description of the wild behaviour that occurred among service people about to go to war. But it was all part of telling the story as clearly and directly as he could. We kept in touch over the years often meeting at World Future Society (WFS) and World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) conferences. During this time I also got to know his wife, Laura-Lee, an accomplished artist. On one occasion during a conference in Turku, Finland, she and I



quietly exited from a rather heavy-going formal plenary to explore some of the antiquities of this fascinating town. The occasion that stands out most clearly, however, took place in July 1996 when the first hard copy edition of the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (KBFS) was launched at a WFS meeting in Washington DC. Wendell and Hazel Henderson had inspired me as I found my way into futures and I was delighted when they both agreed to share the podium and the sense of occasion with me. The following year, Wendell and I had an exchange in which I posed a few questions of mutual interest and he very kindly elaborated. The conversation was written up and subsequently appeared in the *Journal of Futures Studies*. One of the key questions I asked concerned key learnings he'd had over a distinguished career. In response he elaborated on four key points:

- The value of scepticism
- The need for moral courage
- The importance of social order, and
- The importance of hope.

Then, on the question of what the 'special role' of Futures Studies might be he responded by saying that:

Futurists have provided important insights both about the future dangers and opportunities for the human community through the foresight they have provided. Moreover, by providing alternative futures and by showing what might be or what might have been compared with present developments as they are, futurists perform an important role in bearing witness, exposing some of the follies of public discourse and decision-making.⁴

Wendell's 'bearing witness' was by no means merely academic. He spoke forcefully against the invasion of Iraq at the Smithsonian Institution just days before it began. He and Laura-Lee also joined others marching through the streets of Washington to express their opposition. They were deeply troubled at some of the mistakes and bad decisions they saw being made at the national level. But they never lost hope on the potential of positive changes in other areas such as conservation, public transport and peaceful international negotiation.



As time passed and we both attended fewer formal meetings we took the chance to catch up on a couple of visits to New York. In both cases the Bells travelled in by train and stayed at the Yale Club near Central Station, which made it easy to enjoy dinner somewhere nearby. On the second of these visits I was proud to present Wendell with a copy of *To See With Fresh Eyes*.⁵ Despite some 'technical difficulties' with the camera we were able to obtain some pictures of the four of us on the occasion of this last meeting.

Since then, and indeed throughout, we continued to correspond. The very last message I received from him followed the publication in *Futures* of the third and last of a series I'd written on Re-Assessing the IT revolution.⁶ As ever, his comments were exceedingly generous and thoughtful.⁷ For someone of such impressive achievements he was modest, understanding and always ready to help. Even on the rare occasions when we disagreed about something – the role of predictions in FS for example – our conversations would move on, flowing around the obstacle as if it barely existed. At the core of his being were qualities that he both recommended and practiced throughout – a genuine spirit of generosity and kindness. This, above all, is what I will always remember him for.

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December 2019

Notes

¹ Bell, W. (1996, 1997). *The Foundations of Futures Studies* vols 1 & 2. New Brunswick: Transaction Pubs.

² Bell, W. (2012) *Memories of the Future*. New Brunswick: Transaction Pubs.

³ I was delighted that he chose to use some of my comments, along with those of several others, on the dust jacket.

⁴ Slaughter, R. & Bell, W. Looking towards the Futures Studies renaissance: A conversation between Richard A. Slaughter and Wendell Bell. (2007). *Journal of Futures Studies*, 12, 1 95-108.

⁵ Slaughter, R. (2012). *To See with Fresh Eyes: Integral Futures and the Global Emergency*. Brisbane: Foresight International.

⁶ Slaughter, R. (2018). Reassessing the IT revolution Part 3: Framing solutions. *Futures* 100, 1-19.

⁷ Bell, W. (2018). Personal message May 31: "Dear Richard: I just finished reading your new article. Congratulations. It is brilliant, filled with important, relevant, and essential ideas. I plan to re-read it and take notes. (I couldn't help saying "Amen" when I read "... power in the wrong hands creates more problems than it solves." Given the present president of the United States many of us groan every day as he behaves meanly and unfairly toward others). Also, many thanks for your kind and generous treatment of my work I hope you get some response, including followers who will use and implement some of your ideas. Warmest regards, Wendell.