Defending the Future

Introductory Overview of a Special Issue of On the Horizon on Responses to The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History

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A primary objective in writing *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History* (BWCH) (Slaughter, 2010) was to bring as much clarity as possible to some of the complex, multi-layered and profoundly challenging issues that face our world today. A second objective was to establish if there were, in fact, viable ways forward beyond what I saw as an increasingly compromised present, pathways that lead towards more humanly compelling futures. These twin purposes largely dictated how the book was framed and how it evolved. Part one focused on the nature of 'the problem.' Part two considered a range of possible solutions, some of which were at the conceptual stage while others were already being trialled in one form or another. I wanted to leave the reader with a sense that, while the outlook might initially appear very bleak, there were real and substantive grounds for informed hope and effective action.

My own journey had started more than 40 years ago when, as a young student teacher, I discovered Edmund Leach's 1967 Reith Lectures called *A Runaway World* (Leach, 1967). Now I was attempting my own summation. After all the reading, the conferences, working in or with various organisations; all the long-standing contacts, working relationships and friendships with outstanding Futurists and Foresight Practitioners from around the world; could I produce a coherent overview?

I was not entirely sure. I was, however, clear about my starting point – the need to review some of the most cogent sources of information and knowledge available about the state of the world and, beyond that, provide a view of the evolving pattern of 'signals' that are constantly emitted by the global system (Steffen, W. et al, 2004). What did all this amount to? I felt from the outset that the story I would tell would, to some extent, not necessarily be the kind of news that people would be ready to hear. So early on it was unclear how the project would work out. As the first chapters took shape, however, a narrative began to develop reflecting what is, perhaps, an underlying reality of our times. That is, the many ways that the human species is driving some parts of the global system beyond any reasonable limits. It was inevitable, therefore, that the *Limits to Growth* (LtG) project that began in the early 1970s would become a central theme (Meadows, et al, 1972). As Part one evolved I felt it sufficiently 'on track' to circulate the current draft to some of my colleagues for their feedback and comment. This is a good place to record how valuable their comments and

suggestions were. They raised issues I'd overlooked, pointed out errors and significantly improved the quality of this work-in-progress.

An example of this is a comment by Ken Wilber about an article I wrote for *The Journal of Integral Theory and Practice* on a review of climate change literature (Slaughter, 2009). In that piece I'd made reference to organised crime as a reflection of humanity's 'shadow', or repressed contents of awareness. The point was that, unless we took some of these subterranean impulses and their effects into account, our attempts at rational restorative actions in the wider world would be vitiated or undermined. This resulted in an entire chapter devoted to the topic. While few have commented on this I'm not aware of any other substantial work on the global emergency paying explicit attention to this under-regarded area. It is therefore gratifying to know, for example, that Dennis Morgan has taken it up for this issue of *On the Horizon* (OTH) and provided us with a more recent overview of the subject. Much more work needs to be carried out on the question of 'structural criminality' and its malign effects upon a world already experiencing unprecedented stresses from many other sources. In brief, the 'values' adopted by the international Mafia can only have one outcome, the pervasive signs of which are perhaps seen most clearly in and around Naples, Italy. This is a future that should rightly be feared and refused in its entirety (Saviano, 2007).

With part one completed my attention turned to consider what I regarded as more inspiring and hopeful themes. I soon realised that there was value in taking a closer look at, and critiquing, the notion of 'collapse.' The concept had been explored by various writers and figured prominently in the LtG. Over subsequent years a variety of attempts to model the global system were undertaken in order to discover how the latter might behave under 'anthropogenic forcing' – the growing stresses created by human growth and development. The news that emerged from these studies was far from encouraging. 'Overshoot and collapse' became a kind of mantra that, in a way, set us up for a view of the future that was little short of a continuing disaster. I felt that shifting from a predominantly fatalistic 'collapse' narrative to one that could be summarised under the heading of 'descent' would not only be more accurate but also more likely to stimulate constructive responses. Peter Hayward drew my attention to the work of J. M. Greer who for some years has been one of the leading figures in what might be called 'descent theory' (Greer, 2008). But there were also many others whose lives and work focused on these questions and who had, over time, produced no shortage of suggestions and real-world innovations. So I set about exploring some of these.

What also perhaps distinguished my efforts from more mainstream accounts was the fact that I drew, to some extent, on an Integral perspective (Slaughter, 2012). I felt then, and I continue to believe now, that this was, and is, a highly appropriate strategy. While it is by no means the only option, it provides a panoramic and inclusive perspective that helped fulfil my first objective of bringing clarity to these questions. That not everyone favours this approach is unexceptional and to be expected. Personally I've never doubted that it provides a useful and balanced starting point to approach a wide variety of phenomena

many of which, in other approaches, tend to be omitted. Nevertheless, the Integral component of my thinking and work has sometimes been exaggerated. Readers of BWCH may or may not have noticed that none of the three exemplars of 'ways forward' (or 'walking the walk') that I drew upon late in the book are Integral theorists *per se* (James Hansen, Muhammad Yunus and Joanna Macy). So I'm delighted that Chris Riedy acknowledges their very specific significance in his paper. They provide a number of productive answers to questions about transcending negativity and becoming both constructive and empowered. These issues are addressed in several of the contributions to this special issue so I'll add a brief biographical note that is relevant here.

During my early years at Lancaster University I was invited to a teacher's centre in Wolverhampton, situated in the UK's industrial Midlands. A group of teachers had started a project on futures but had ended up feeling somewhat deflated or depressed. So far as I can recall, I'd not yet encountered Fred Polak's seminal work on the social implications of futures images (Polak, 1961). But after reflecting on the issues presented to me I developed a couple of exercises dealing with optimism and pessimism. What I realised at that time has remained with me ever since. That is, that *optimism and pessimism are both inherently ambiguous.* It is simply not the case that people are *necessarily* depressed by negative images of futures or stimulated by positive ones. Everything depends on what happens next, on what resources are brought to bear and, specifically, what level and kinds of futures literacy are available to assist and support them (Slaughter, 1991). I suppose I may not be typical (since I've had more time and resources than most to think / feel this through) but I actually find negative images of futures powerfully motivating. Perhaps I subconsciously attempted to demonstrate that in this in the book.

That said, my view of the human prospect has certainly moved further towards the pessimistic pole as compared with only a few years ago. The reasons for this are various but include the following.

- It has become ever more obvious how large corporations have, in the main, become increasingly powerful and remain committed to unsustainable growth for short term gains on behalf of a tiny minority.
- Many conflicts are arising or being exacerbated by the collision of these special interests with the realities of resource scarcity and climate change dilemmas. This is not a viable way forward.
- The long-term effects of 'wild globalisation' continue to generate suffering and inequality within and between nations. China's vandalised environment demonstrates some of the consequences of rapid and careless over-development.
- There is still no effective international or structure or process in place that can facilitate the emergence of global governance. This is particularly clear in the continuing failure to address (let alone resolve) the fundamental causes of the global financial crisis.
- Educational institutions worldwide continue to ignore or avoid educating for challenging and uncertain futures. Advanced courses on Futures and

Foresight remain extremely rare. Hence social foresight remains a distant dream far removed from effective implementation.

- Technology is often put forward as a solution to many issues, particularly in the USA. But the fact remains that high tech coupled with inadequate values leads rapidly to dysfunctional and Dystopian outcomes (Lanier, 2013).
- Finally, denial, repression and avoidance remain common responses to global issues. As a result, powerful signals from the global system continue to be widely ignored. Mass media collude in this process of widespread mystification and 'not knowing.'

I will comment here only on the last point. It was driven home when I saw a recent documentary about 'Superstorm Sandy.' The program outlined the way that two weather systems collided off of the North East Coast of the USA. At one point, and one point only, a very brief mention was made of the fact that increased temperatures had ramped up the ferocity of the storm that flooded parts of New York and left some of its suburbs looking like war zones. I realised that a clear and obvious chance to link human responsibility for global warming with increasingly destructive storms had been set aside and lost. Somewhere in an editorial meeting the decision had been made to under-play that key factor so that, when the program was aired, it was very easily missed. Taken in isolation the stifling of this particular 'signal' may not appear significant. What is does do is to help to explain why the human outlook continues to deteriorate. The dominance of the mass media by corporate interests means that they dampen down, dilute or simply ignore this kind of crucial feedback information that is essential for motivation for change to develop and social learning to occur.

I'm not going to comment on all the contributions to this special issue. But I will summarise my view of some of the most valuable suggestions further work that have been put forward. To begin with, a couple of the papers raise questions about what might constitute effective communication about global issues. Breaux, for example, puts forward some useful guidelines for affective communication with broader constituencies that deserve to be taken seriously while Collins briefly outlines her view of the need to 'accentuate the positive.' Heinonen contributes an argument that parallels and supports much of what was written in BWCH, reviews some possible responses and concludes that progressive ideas may be an 'infinite resource.'

Floyd's paper draws our attention to the role of particular forms of energy (especially oil and gas) in helping to shape what is possible in any society. This is something I'd not really considered when, late in the book, I developed an argument around the positive implications of advanced awareness in concert with advanced technology. I still think that visioning work along those lines has great potential to help people see distant futures in more positive terms and, in so doing, help them escape from the 'prison' of an over-determined present. But Floyd's argument is a beautifully nuanced demonstration of the need to check one's assumptions and to relate them back to factors one may have not seen earlier on. It's a fine demonstration of how a discourse around these issues can

develop and grow – how to be properly critical and constructive at the same time.

Hines paper on long-term value changes draws on his analysis of some 20 different values systems that, overall, offer both hope and raise concerns. He poses a number of key questions that can be used to frame and carry forward future work. On 'global issues,' will post-modern actors in currently affluent nations be capable of effective action? Will consumers in the currently rapidly developing nations be willing or able to moderate consumption and growth? Will those described as 'integrals' gain sufficiently in number and influence to be effective? From these questions he sets out a research agenda that I very much hope will be taken up, further developed and applied. Both he and Riedy draw attention to the fact that assumptions about the assumed effectiveness of 'late stage' human development need to be much more rigorously examined.

Riedy's contribution to this special issue of OTH is a highlight of the collection that deserves careful and sustained attention. His theme is centred on exploring the notion of what the 'waking up' metaphor might mean and how it can be operationalised in practice. As he notes: 'simply hoping for an awakening is not enough. We need to actively explore and prospect for realistic pathways towards positive futures.' Further, he writes of the need to 'move from an idealised normative view of awakening to a realistic, empirical investigation...' His paper sets out what he calls 'seven signals of awakening' which he employs as a 'preliminary environmental scanning framework.' This is exciting and innovative work. It may well constitute a new chapter in the developing story of how humanity can respond to new levels of hazard and risk without losing its aspirations and hopes for a better world.

Near the end of the piece Riedy sounds a note of caution, i.e. that it is 'surprisingly difficult to identify inspiring visions of positive futures that have gained widespread traction.' Overall, however, the paper introduces a research agenda for 'exploring the nature and trajectories of awakening.' Finally, he has a couple of radically constructive suggestions for practitioners. First, that they can 'work to strengthen the signals' that he and others have identified. Second that currently disparate initiatives can be brought together 'under a common banner,' perhaps constituting 'an awakening movement.' These suggestions are of enormous value and I hope that they will similarly be critiqued, expanded, further developed and applied in a range of ways and in different contexts.

Overall these contributions to the special issue of OTH more than fulfil the goal of commenting on and, in some cases, extending the core concerns of BWCH. Reading and interpreting the signals of global change is, in itself, a huge and challenging task. To communicate an evolving understanding about what they mean and, further, what should be done and by whom, is more challenging still. No one in their right minds could imagine that any one individual would be able to carry out more than a fraction of that task alone. On the other hand, a widening group of self-critical, open and dedicated workers in a range of related fields can and should carry these agendas – and the practical developments that spring from them - forward.

The 'awakening movement' referred to by Riedy powerfully resonates with a related notion that has been with me for a while. That is a view of the steady and irreversible emergence of *a mainstream project* to secure the future of humanity. It goes beyond what I regard as a somewhat naïve and over-optimistic view advanced by some that the current plethora of NGOs can act as a unified force for change (e.g. Hawken, 2007). Currently they seem to me to be too diverse and culturally marginalised to have anything like the required transformative effect. The 'project' I have in mind is inspired and driven by diverse actors, organisations and means – many of them from mainstream institutions such as universities, banks, the legal system and so on. It begins, perhaps, with the realisation that the deep myths that drove humanity into this unprecedented 'mega crisis' or 'global emergency' have run their course and are now exhausted. As the evidence becomes unavoidable, a much wider appreciation emerges of the fact that the 'wake-up call' confronting humanity is reality-based. It is not a figment of the imagination, nor will it disappear any time soon. Rather, it reflects a structural reality – or series of them – that are permanently re-aligning the terms of our species' tenure on this planet.

Central to an understanding of that process may be the rehabilitation and broad acceptance of the conclusions of the *Limits to Growth* project that emerged over its 40-year span. The very same project that was pilloried and abused, portrayed as 'ideology,' as unreasonable, threatening and extreme. Perverse valuations of this kind flow from powerfully embedded human and cultural defences that need to be named, exposed and set aside. Similarly, it is increasingly obvious that it is the industrial corporatised view of reality with its denial of limits, its extreme anthropocentricism, its unbridled commitment to consumption, growth and over-development that needs to be retired. Beyond this greater efforts certainly need to be invested in developing, and investing greater meaning and significance, in positive and compelling images of possible futures. Much of the substance and inspiration required to support such work is not new but was given to us by forward-looking pioneers some years ago (Macy, 1983; Jungk & Mullert, 1987).

If the BWCH and the papers presented here can play even a small part in the process of waking up and taking species responsibility then we can all breathe a little easier. We can look our kids in the eye and know that *they* know we did what we could as well as we could.

It is, after all, their future and that of future generations that we are defending.

Note

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