

What Does the WFSF Offer? What Does it Ask of You?

Richard A Slaughter

The task of the futurist is, in my view, that of understanding the social environment (in its complexity) as much as possible and searching for what is changing. Some call this 'seeds of change', some 'hidden signals' that may lead to other changes from those easily detected or expected.... This attitude does indeed need study and rigorous methodologies in whatever field we are working. But most of all it needs an effort to understand others and listen to them. Is this not why we speak of FUTURES and not future?

Eleonora Masini, message to WFSF e-list 27th July, 2007

Since I relinquished the WFSF Presidency I've deliberately taken a 'back seat' as it were, stepped out of the on-line dialogue for a while and taken stock of 'where we are' as an organisation and a field. What I believe I see in the Futures field has implications for the WFSF. In some ways the former reflects the wider world with its conflicts, divisions and embedded social, cultural and economic distinctions.

One of the key similarities is the way we are constantly bedevilled by what can only be called the 'politics of ego', which are unfortunately fundamentally unsolvable at a taken-for-granted everyday level. In fact I would say that it is currently the single most significant block to further progress. To gain any sort of purchase on the many distortions that arise requires at least two kinds of resources. First, some sort of enlightening meta-schema is needed that supports vertical distinctions regarding different 'layers' or 'stages' of human development. A number of writers and theorists have fortunately provided us with some impressive resources that contribute exactly this. Among them are Gebser, Wilber and Sarkar.¹ The system known as Spiral Dynamics also provides an accessible gloss on issues of human development (particularly in relation to values) and an easily-learned set of distinctions. These also provide greater clarity into how our interior worlds mediate the outer one. The other resources required are motivational and turn on questions such as: 'am I willing to risk this fragile ego and look beyond it to more 'world centric' modes of being?' and 'am I also willing to put in the work required?' Solutions to 'the problem of ego' arise from these and related sources. In the long term the grounds of solutions to global conflicts and divisions can perhaps only be achieved through immersion in, and careful use of, such material. There is obviously no quick fix and not everyone will want to take part in the work of lifting awareness and capability to ever more inclusive levels.

In the meantime, the field is split and fractured in various ways including: cultural, linguistic, professional and other faultlines. One of the many ways these manifest is in the common desire of people to 'do their own thing'. That may mean 'bad mouthing' existing organisations (without ever taking the trouble to understand them) and creating local versions. That's all very well if the newcomers network widely and affiliate in effective and functional ways. Yet that very duplication of organisational efforts (with

minor variations) also involves duplication of administrative and financial burdens. Given that the human and financial resources available are so scarce, the duplication of effort is often wasteful and new organisations may disappear almost as quickly as they are announced, leaving little of value behind.

In recent times the contradictions have appeared to multiply. Now that the news deals on a daily basis with the kinds of generic issues that have long concerned Futures workers of all kinds, you'd think that the field would be seen as thriving and successful. But that does not appear to be the case and a profound ambiguity permeates its collective awareness. Are the divisions within FS simply evidence of dysfunction or can one see the 'shadows of success' in the way that futures work is dissolving into a thousand different specialities and niches? Could this be one kind of future for the field – to have been 'in at the start' of a whole new series of knowledge based innovations? Even if that's true, there remains a need for an organised effort to deal with core issues for the field itself. These include:

- questions of definition and core purposes;
- issues of quality;
- the further evolution of futures methods;
- the induction and training of subsequent generations; and
- the ability to progressively understand and resolve questions of global significance.

Currently the only organisation that has the slightest chance of fulfilling even a part of that brief is the WFSF. Why? It is the only organisation that is:

- international and multi-cultural;
- critical and facilitative;
- driven by progressive values;
- acknowledges the disadvantaged and 'the other'; and, crucially,
- has a nourishing culture that is grounded in perennial human concerns.

In saying this I want to acknowledge that there are, indeed, other organisations that also fulfil useful roles. Two that come to mind are the Association of Professional Futurists (a group of mainly progressive younger US consultants) and the Seattle-based Foundation for the Future (a philanthropic initiative funded by Walter Kistler). I have commented on others elsewhere and will therefore not refer to them here.^{2, 3}

The organisation that aligns most closely with a global role is the WFSF, and this notwithstanding its relatively small membership. Why? Answers can be found in a special issue of *Futures* published in June 2005.⁴ Here are several overlapping accounts of the origins and history of the WFSF. Read carefully, each one clarifies exactly why the organisation was created and how its original impulse was modified and extended over time by different, always small, always dedicated, groups of people who took up the work without thought of material reward and then handed it on. Successive Presidents and Secretaries General (always democratically elected by the membership and

accountable at each General Assembly) hosted these core functions in many different parts of the world. While this frequently led to real problems of coordination and continuity, the principle that this was and is a genuinely global organisation has been constantly affirmed throughout its entire history. This is no mean feat.

Money has always been short because the WFSF cannot appeal to standard sources that could normally be relied upon to support progressive causes. Furthermore, the shifting of central functions made it difficult for various organisations to keep track. Lack of funding, however, has to some extent been partially offset by the quality of the human resources devoted to it over the years. The position worsened, however, when UNESCO, once a major source of funding, itself fell upon hard times and necessarily reduced its involvement in such causes. A promising avenue of sustained future funding opened up when the links between foresight and philanthropy were explored in 2004.⁵ Yet this is not a 'quick fix' either because while significant sums of money are, in fact, available, it takes a great deal of time and effort to walk this particular legitimisation path and qualify for serious consideration. Continued effort here will one day reap rich rewards, projecting the organisation into a new stage of development.

Thus currently the WFSF finds itself located in a world beset by a powerfully interacting set of major crises and systemic problems. It may well be the case that further progress in futures-related causes and work of all kinds, depends on the way that increased awareness of these global 'drivers' serves to awaken hitherto passive constituencies everywhere. The latter have, until now, been 'sleepwalking' into the future, assuming smooth continuity when, in fact and as futurists already know, severe inflections and breakdowns can be anticipated in nearly every system upon which human civilisation depends.⁶ What, then, is the way forward?

The answer can be summed up very simply: 'stay the course'. What I mean by this is as follows. When I was researching the origins of the WFSF I found it inspiring and useful to find out what people actually said back then and also what values drove them. Much of this is summed up in Robert Jungk's declaration that the 'powerful tools' (of futures research) 'should not be restricted to a technocratic elite'. He added that 'the future belongs to us all and it is for that reason that ... future research is internationalised and democratised as soon as possible.'⁷

I once sat next to one co-founder of an aspirant Futures organisation at a meeting in New York while another such talked on at some length about technology and forecasting. When the latter sat down, a disturbed Robert Jungk took the podium and, in his heavy German accent declared with passion how he'd apparently 'boarded the wrong plane' and 'come to the wrong place'. He took strenuous exception to what the previous speaker had been saying, stood his ground and countered it with his view that futures work was not merely about technology and forecasting but about the well-being of humans, cultures and societies as a whole. Furthermore, it was a democratic duty and necessity. His passion was clear and unapologetic. He was not there to follow in the footsteps of his erstwhile US colleagues, nor to support their high-tech visions of the future, but to assert a very European concern for the future viability of humankind. The tradition based on

this view is not only alive it is also in good shape. That is, it is better equipped than ever before to deal in depth with such concerns. As the quote from Eleonora Masini (above) also suggests, nothing that followed has diminished that vision and that commitment.

So this is what the WFSF has to offer. It is very clearly not the sweet anodyne story of 'how technology will save the world'. It is not the false hope that trite and popular approaches to futures can do anything other than skim the surface, spin the wheels, and provide what Godet calls 'fun and entertainment'. It is not even a promise that this world can be re-oriented in time to prevent the 'overshoot and collapse' futures that now loom so large.

What the WFSF offers can be summed up in three words: *reality, environment and culture*. It's the reality of knowing at a deep level what's at stake for the human species and all the others that lie under its current sway. There are costs in having such knowledge so we cannot expect everyone to share the burden. Indeed, given the choice, most will elect not to. The WFSF also offers the hard work of standing up for values and commitments that matter, even as others continue to 'skim' the field for their own more limited concerns, which include earning significant income from bloated corporations that Beck called 'legal but illegitimate'. It offers the dedication that comes from clarity of insight, necessarily coupled with a profound modesty of expression and sense of self. (This, by the way, is one reason why any rapprochement between Futures and marketing will always be temporary and strategic, never systemic.) It offers a chance to live with the knowledge that optimism may be misplaced and that the human experiment may be unable to transcend its own in-built limitations. It offers a sense of purpose that goes beyond common commitments and everyday tasks. It offers a chance to find out how each of us fits in a wider pattern and can connect that knowledge with specific tasks only we as individuals in particular places and times can perform.

As an environment, the WFSF provides us with the opportunity to know and learn from other individuals and other cultures. In that very real sense we find out that we are never alone, never locked into one set of personal and cultural settings. Unlike every other Futures organisation I know, it's possible at Federation meetings to sit at a table for ten and have ten cultures represented right there. With the advent of the internet and email the scattered membership of the WFSF connects, interacts, argues and pursues projects in the certain knowledge not only that there are others doing similar work, but also that those others are available, accessible, as and when needed. While a few abuse that ease of contact and play their sad games of egoic projection on the Federation e-list, most members use it with sensitivity and care.

As a culture the Federation has no equal anywhere in the world and we must value it more highly than is currently the case. Let me be clear about this. For any one of us to stand up and confront the sources of power and influence, especially when we call into question both the motives and the actions of the powerful, we are extremely vulnerable. One of our guises is that of 'whistle blowers', willing to challenge agendas, speak up for the weak, aspire to represent the best shared interests of humankind. As such, we can be cut down, eliminated, marginalised and forgotten. *As individuals....* But we are more than

that. As the current representatives of a culture of informed action, deep insight and powerfully grounded concern we transcend personal limitations. In some cases it may be that our voices are stilled too early, as they must eventually be stilled anyway. But as members of a culture our works and our efforts continue. They become the ground upon which others stand, work, live. As we carry forward the concerns of pioneering futurists everywhere, the best of our own contributions are taken up, critiqued, extended and applied by others. This is not exactly a holy calling, but it is certainly a genuine and honourable one in which the foreknowledge of species suffering is balanced by genuine insight and deep affinity.

So these three terms – and what they stand for - lie at the heart of ‘what the Federation is about:’ reality, environment and culture. In these respects one is reminded of the words of John F Kennedy:

‘ask not what the Federation can do for you; ask what you can do for the Federation.’

In a later article I will consider some of the practical consequences that emerge from the view set out here.

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Notes and references

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2. Richard Slaughter, Asleep at the wheel: the World Future Society at Forty, Futures, 40, 1, 2008, 91-101.
3. An overview of The State of the Future, 2006 by Chris Riedy gives a flavour of the limitations of the MP. He comments ‘This report is almost entirely focused on behavioural and structural issues affecting global futures, giving very little attention to psychological and inter-subjective issues. There is much discussion of technological, environmental, economic and institutional trends but little discussion of values, worldviews and cultural differences. The main reference to culture is one that focuses on the need for change (but)... there is no evidence of an understanding of the plurality of culture, or how cultures develop and change’. State Of Play In the Futures Field (SOPIFF) research report, 2007.
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7. Robert Jungk, in Slaughter (ed) 2005, op cit, p 353.

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