

My Journey as a Futurist

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From September 25-27, 2003, the School of Leadership Studies hosted Andy Hines on campus at Regent University, for the first annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay by Hines was circulated to participants beforehand. We encourage you to join us next year for our annual Foresight conference, as we hear from top futurists from the both the U.S. and around the world.

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Introduction to the Future - the Terrie O'Donnell years

Sitting in a crowded classroom in a not-too-well-preserved building at Salem State College circa 1984, I was introduced to the concept of futures metaphors. It had never occurred to me that people actually systematically thought about the future and a body of knowledge and tools had emerged around it. The course, which I had taken on a whim was called "History of the Future" and taught by Terrence O'Donnell, a history professor who was an active member of the World Future Society. I remember thinking that the material was crazy, and that the professor was too, but it definitely caught my attention. And given that it was my 5th or 6th major at my 3rd undergraduate school, finding something that caught my attention was a very good thing.

Little did I realize at that moment that Terrie O'Donnell and History of the Future was going to be a pivotal influence in my life. I devoured as much as Terrie was willing to pass on - we even made a couple of independent study courses. Cornish's *Study of the Future* was my first text. The World Future Society was the

most influential organization and was terrific gateway into what's available in the world of futures studies. *The Futurist* magazine was filled with wonders. Of course, at that time, I didn't have the power of critical thinking to discern what was feasible and what was fancy. But it did serve to fire my imagination.

We went through several classics, such as *The Third Wave* and *The Art of Conjecture* and *Limits to Growth*. It's worth mentioning the Club of Rome's comes to mind as a very influential organization at the point in time, especially when you consider that's they've pretty much dropped off the map today. We read two follow-ons to *Limits*, - *Mankind at the Turning Point* being the one that comes to mind. We crafted a fairly extensive reading list of futures and science fiction texts relating to different images - both utopias and dystopia. Here I recall old standbys like *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *Looking Backward*. A couple of the lesser-know texts were Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Liebowitz*, Neville Shute's *On the Beach*, and I was particularly fascinated by Bertram Gross's *Friendly Fascism*. Gross pointed out to me the importance of questioning what we take for granted and the importance of different perspectives and interpretation.

The most influential project I undertook was a study called "Images of the Future." The key texts were Kenneth Boulding's *The Image* and Fred Polak's *The Image of the Future*. While these books are less prominent today, I recommend them as fundamental building blocks for building a conceptual tool kit for studying the future. The important idea that I took from this study was the importance of images of the future in shaping the actual future. The hard news was that most people had either no coherent image or a seriously flawed one, often based on a television show like the Jetson's. The paucity of images of the future in part explained from me some of the problems of the day. I've since been working toward building a positive image of the future that provides a sense of what we're working for.

This period of my futures career was basically one of devouring the leading ideas in the field at the time. I had no idea where this journey might take me, but I wanted more. Since I was paying for my own education through a combination of full-time work and student loans, I didn't feel like I had to answer to anyone about my choices. Believe me, I got plenty of advice that suggested I was wasting my time and that Law School was the place to be. There was hope that I would come to my senses and get "back on track." Thanks goodness, I didn't listen, and got together with Professor O'Donnell to look for grad school programs. We found the UHCL program, so when the time came, I packed up "vintage" Plymouth Galaxy and drove Southwest.

Playing with the Future - the Clear Lake Experience

It's probably worth re-stating that I enrolled in the Graduate Program in Studies of the Future with no idea of what I would do with it or how this would land me a job. Yet I had no doubt that this was exactly what I wanted to do. It was a case of simply following the path that seemed to be being laid out before me.

The high point of my Clear Lake experience was the many long discursions and debates about future topics that took place among a small core group occasionally interspersed with others. Sometimes they simply spontaneously arose whenever a few of us got together. One near legendary conversation between alum Ken Hamik and student Will Lidwell concerned whether the world would be better off if run by a government of "Spocks" or McCoy's. This debated stopped - it's never ended - in a parking lot in the wee hours of the morning. Other times our discussions were formally organized events as part of the Futures Studies Student Association. I was involved with this group from the start and served as its president for a year. This began a tradition for me of continually being involved in some sort of professional development activity relating to the future.

I would characterize this as my most idealistic phase. Everything seemed possible. Everything seemed open to question. The potential for a truly different world first came to light - at least the possibility seemed more real than ever before. It was also a time of recognizing how wrong things seemed to be. This would be my first introduction to critical futures thinking, where we learned to question assumptions about everything, especially those things that we took for granted. A key skill here was learning how to ask better questions. Unfortunately, at least to me, undergraduate education has seemed more about teaching us to provide better answers.

The faculty at Clear Lake provided a nice mix of different backgrounds and experiences. Peter Bishop was an excellent source of empirical and social science methods. We have developed a solid relationship over time. We often use one another as sounding boards for new, untested ideas. This is a truly valuable relationship and

one that those of us in this field must hold precious, since there are so few of us. Oliver Markley emphasized the realm of consciousness and transformational futures. His ideas brought me into territory that I'd never been before. Interestingly, I took something of a hiatus from this realm for a while, and have begun re-engaging these ideas in the few years. Oliver was instrumental in my getting an internship with Joe Coates and providing some hands-on consulting experience. Chris Dede, now at Harvard, was a terrific teacher and was particularly helpful to me as a grapple with understanding the role technology in society. Jib Fowles was very helpful in media and communications as related to the future, and provided a valuable advisory role for me.

While I could easily write an entire essay about my UHCL experience, I'll focus on a few of high points. Certainly a couple of these involved visits from prominent futurists. Peter Schwartz from the Global Business Network came and gave a lecture on the future that was great, but even better was the intimate Q&A discussion that followed in a small room just for the students. It was great to hear first-hand the experiences of an actual working futurist. Dennis Meadows also visited and took us through a game he developed that highlighted the pitfalls of overshoot and collapse. We all managed to "doom" our environment - the lesson provided being how it is not necessarily that our leaders are trying to do bad things, but that it is very difficult to do good things - and that tradeoffs are a part of most decisions.

While I read so much of interesting, one book stands out as being particularly illuminating. I had found myself developing a kind of anti-technology bias, and wanted to try and better understand its role in our lives. Professor Dede recommended Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and it was just what I needed. It gave me a new understanding and helped to balance my perspective and make me less of an anti-technology zealot.

As graduation approached, there arose the practical question of next steps. I was an admirer of Joe Coates' work. I found his writing to be clear and straightforward - I found his book *Issues Management* to be very practical. So when it came time to think about getting a job, I sought and landed an internship with Joe over a summer. I recall the "warnings" I received from several colleagues about this plan. They pretty much said that he's very tough, but you'll learn a lot. And they emphasized tough. This turned out to be accurate and useful advice.

Futures Boot Camp - Coates & Consulting

To characterize my experience as a consulting futurist, I must first describe Joe as a key mentor of mine. To my mind the great contribution of Joe to the field is in bringing a provocative and tough-minded approach to a field often characterized by soft thinking. He has helped raise the bar of professionalism in the high quality of his work and his watchdog-like role in analyzing and critiquing the output of the field. I found it amusing that in writing any piece about the future, I often thought about how Joe would respond to a particular point. His voice remains present in my work today, as a reminder to sharpen it up.

I had other important teachers at Coates & Jarratt as well. Jennifer Jarratt brought an approach and perspective much different than Joe's. Perhaps what I remember her emphasizing most is the importance of the role of people in exploring the future. It can be tempting to become overly enamored with systems, technologies, and statistics, and forget about the role of the human element. Jennifer would not let me forget that. John Mahaffie was and is to me the model example of a productive futurist. He was amazingly capable of getting up to speed on a new topic and quickly bringing insight to it. I never saw a topic that intimidated him, which served to inspire me the many times I felt in over my head.

At Coates & Jarratt, our work had to be derived from a reproducible methodology and data. Many times I heard reporters ask Joe what separated the good futurists from the charlatans, and the answer was always that the good futurists used a method that they would openly share and could be examined by clients. I once asked if he wasn't worried about being "ripped off." He laughed and responded that those who would try to do it wouldn't know how. The value was really in the people behind the technique rather than the technique itself. This was a gift for the field. I've adopted the same approach in my work, arguing that sharing leads to the development of methodology, and that our challenge is to keep improving in order to stay head of the imitators.

Another manifestation of this openness was his rule of giving away one day's worth of consulting per week. It was always my sense that we were much more a think tank than a consulting company - if you'll accept the distinction that a think tank is concerned with spreading the message first and a consulting company with money first. Still, the work had to be useful. The key overriding principle comes from his philosophy of pragmatism. While we lived and breathed in the realm of ideas when in the office, there had to be a translation into very concrete recommendations and action steps, or the work would not make it out the front door. One of the most stinging criticisms we could receive was that we were being either "academics" or "ideologues." Both monikers arose from a perception that our work was being self-indulgent and not serving the needs of the client.

I think I was the first to dub Coates & Jarratt, Inc as "boot camp for futurists." Many times aspiring interns or futurists would ask me about working for Joe and the team, and I felt this phrase summed it up nicely. Not everyone can make it through boot camp, but if could, you became a strong soldier. Probably the key test was the first group review of your work. The beauty of the job - and Joe often told us would be the best job we would ever have - is that once the group outline a particular project or topic, you as the lead author had complete freedom to prepare the initial draft. But you had to pass group muster. And I'll confess that that experience could be excruciating. Most of us think we do good work, and are smart people, and to have our work shredded can be very humbling, to say the least. But if you could survive this, it did eventually make you stronger. Ultimately, I think Joe can be very proud of the talent that he and the firm has helped shape for the rest of the field.

I often tried to get Joe to reveal his secrets of how he became a leader in the field, as I probed him for advice on my own future. Early on in my tenure at C&J, I thought there must be some kind of secret recipe to Joe's success. He explained that he simply set a goal to be the world's best futurist and then went after it. He suggested I do the same, and assured me that this was achievable. While I was initially frustrated by what I perceived as a lack of help, I came to see the wisdom behind this advice over time. It was clear it was less about magic and more about hard work. I saw Joe work six full days a week. And I'm sure that his work was never far from his mind on the seventh day. And while on the job, he was, as mentioned, continually challenging himself to improve his approach.

I took his advice and began publishing and speaking wherever possible. It's worth noting that many times people see you on an impressive stage and wonder how you did it. As I learned, the limelight was preceded by many a small room or cramped basement with a handful of people who often had no idea what you were talking about. But the only way to get better is to practice, so I took as many speaking engagements as I could and gradually developed from being scared stiff to being relatively at ease and even enjoying being in front of crowds. My formal professional development I continued my outside professional development activities. I helped reinvigorate the Washington DC chapter of the World Future Society which is still going strong today.

Futures on the "Inside" -Kellogg's & Dow

Six years ago, I went "inside" the corporate world. My decision to go inside was largely based on the fact that in our consulting work, we saw again and again how our corporate clients struggled with implementing our work. I thought, "Wouldn't it help if someone on the inside understood what these futurists on the outside were talking about and trying to achieve." This phase of my development I would characterize as emphasizing implementation.

My first assignment was as a "Trends Manager" at the Kellogg Company. The challenge here was to outline just what a futurist could do for the company. We put a lot of emphasis on developing content, namely a trends database, that we hoped would inspire our new product development that was "on trend."

Second was my current assignment at Dow Chemical. I reflected that at Kellogg I had probably spent too much time on content at the expense of process. The result was that I had more future content than the organization was capable of processing. So at Dow, I reversed the ratio of time spent developing content and processing it. By processing, I mean conducting workshops and helping groups work with content.

I have learned a lot in the last few years about how to facilitate, particularly as relates to futures concepts and techniques. A particularly invaluable asset that I've been fortunate to have been able to work on throughout both my corporate assignments was to be a scout or broker for creativity and innovation. The links between these and futures work are under-valued in my view. I was surprised to learn that a lot of the futures techniques we'd been using had analogs in the world of creativity and innovation. I highly recommend that futurists familiarize themselves with the tools and techniques these disciplines have to offer us.

It should be noted that we deliberately downplayed the use of the terms "futurist" and "futures studies" and instead emphasized business language and outcomes. Of course, many have figured out my "true identity" as a futurist, and are positive about it. I've termed the strategy I've used as "viral futures." The goal is to infect others with the futures messages, and hope they in turn infect others. The approach to implementing that strategy advocated here could be called "permission futuring," which borrows from Fast Company columnist Seth Godin's superb book called *Permission Marketing*. The premise is to think of our work with internal clients in terms of dating or courtship. We hope to attract our internal customers enough such that they say "yes" when we ask them for a first "futures" date. If we perform well on this first date, analogous to going for a cup of coffee, we can then ask permission for a second date, perhaps the equivalent of dinner. If we perform well on that... We get to do progressively deeper and more interesting work, provided we "deliver the goods" of the early simpler dates or tasks. Experience suggests this approach is a viable one - my own tasks have generally become more involved, interesting, and futures-oriented over time.

Some of the specific things I've done:

- led two projects exploring future "whitespace" growth opportunities;
- regularly consults and leads workshops exploring future growth opportunities for completely new business ventures and existing business units;
- regularly runs workshops regarding the formation of alternative futures business strategies for the strategy group;
- gives talks and runs trends-related exercises for other functional activities, such as public affairs, information systems, and environmental health and safety;
- is a source of referrals to expert futurists and consulting firms;
- seeds futures thinking through the circulation of trip reports from visits to futures meetings and conferences;
- created a "Trends Universe" web site that houses trends also used in various workshops;
- led a "future of the industry study" in partnership with an external futures consulting firm for the senior leadership of the company.

My professional development experience in recent times has been to help co-found the Association of Professional Futurists. Many of us in the futures field felt there was a critical mass of working professional futurists who would benefit from more formal networking and best practice sharing, and work to improve the image of the field. So we spent some time laying groundwork and launched the association about a year-and-a-half ago. It's built to almost a hundred members and we had a very successful inaugural conference last year that explored "the futures of futures."

Here are seven key lessons from my experience inside:

- It's all about people and networks - this is truly a one-person-at-a-time effort; nothing is more valuable than helping internal customers solve problems and the resulting word-of-mouth promotion

- Bring the outside in - multi-client consortiums are a cost-effective way to get lots of futures information and help build a futures constituency
- You must push to generate pull - this is an evangelistic undertaking
- Be patient - have a long view in terms of years of slowly "infecting" the organization
- Deliver the goods, even at the expense of purity - it is better to deliver on a two-year outlook than hold out for a ten-year one; delivering solid, actionable results on the two-year future will open the door to the longer-term
- Present futures thinking and tools as a means, not an end - do not get hung up on whether something is called a futures study or whether there is a department of futures studies.
- It is worth it - there is nothing like the excitement and joy of turning people on to futures thinking.

My personal vision

So where from here? The last few years have been intellectually exciting as I've been absorbing the idea of integral futures from the work of Richard Slaughter and his colleague's at the Australian Foresight Institute. They are drawing heavily on the work of contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber. I have made the pilgrimage through several of Wilber's books. *Sex, Ecology & Spirituality* is the most comprehensive expression of his ideas, though a bit of tough sledding. Two more popular and accessible works are *A Brief History of Everything* and *A Theory of Everything*. We enjoyed a tremendous visit together in Melbourne last fall sharing experiences, and we recently collaborated on a course on integral futures at the most recent World Future Society meeting in San Francisco.

I suspect that we'll see a new flourishing in the futures field as we more deeply understand the implications of integral futures and how to use it with our clients, be they businesspeople, students, government officials, or parishioners. The key concept is learning how to integrate the empirical methods that have dominated the field with the interpretive or critical approaches that have been gaining strength in recent years. And we're likely to witness an outpouring of new methods as well. My intent is to be deeply involved in this next wave of development in the futures field.

Related Links

Andy Hines CV: <http://hsh.cl.uh.edu/futureweb/alumni/hines.html>

World Future Society, <http://www.wfs.org>

Association of Professional Futurists, <http://www.profuturists.org>

Joseph Coates, consulting futurists, <http://www.josephcoates.com>