

# From Ignatius Loyola to Alvin Toffler

## A Personal Essay

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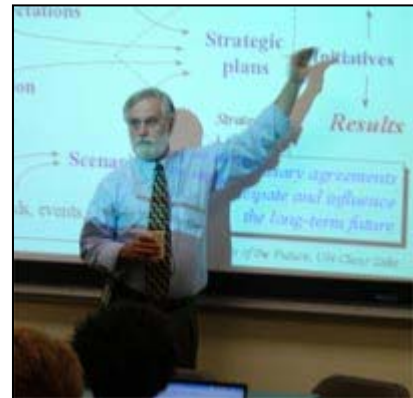
Foresight 2003 Conference - September 2003

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From September 25-27, 2003, the School of Leadership Studies hosted Dr. Bishop on campus at Regent University, for the first annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay by Dr. Bishop 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.

### **Dr. Peter Bishop**

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### **Essay**

I can't really say that my journey has been "as a futurist." It would be more accurate to say "My journey towards becoming a futurist." In other words, I always find that life makes a lot more sense in hindsight than in foresight. Though we seem to have a path laid out for ourselves, it never seems to work that way. But when we look back, the twists and turns take on a different meaning. Whether that meaning is really there or whether it is the product of our capacity to see patterns in whatever data we have, who knows? I'll leave that to those better than I.

I guess I date the beginning of my journey to becoming a futurist at October 4, 1957, the day the Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite. I heard about Sputnik on the front page of the newspaper the next day. (How quaint—to get breaking news from the newspaper!) I was 12 at the time and was probably as interested in space and science fiction as any boy was in the 1950s. My overwhelming impression was how fast things change and how one change can upset the whole world.

The U.S. was really worried about the Soviet Union at that time. It is hard to recreate the fear of those days now that the Soviet Union has collapsed. The McCarthy hearings had just ended, and we believed that the Soviet Union just might have the formula for overtaking the U.S. in science and technology. We knew they were pouring vast sums into science and math education, that their high schools and colleges were very advanced, and now this! The threat was similar to what we thought of Japan in the late 1980s—that they had found the way to send America down the road to a second class power, the same road that Britain had traveled decades before.

Other events of my youth (The Suez War and the Hungarian revolution had just concluded the year before) finally culminated in the assassination of John Kennedy and later of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Much later, the feeling crystallized when I was walking up to UH-Clear Lake shortly after the suicide of one of the faculty members who had founded the university. The image came to me that reality was like a movie screen and that, once in a while, someone from behind would rip through the screen with a knife!

A second formative experience, in a radically different way, came in 1962 when I graduated from high school and entered the seminary to become a Jesuit priest. I was impressed by the lives of the priests and scholastics (young men studying to be priests) who were my teachers. They seemed to be doing something important with their lives, and I wanted to do the same.

My seminary class was one of the last to experience an isolated seminary experience. Today, new seminarians live close to college campuses and take classes there. We lived in the country. Ironically, it was only a few miles from my house in suburban St. Louis, but without telephone, radio, newspaper or television, and only a half-a-dozen afternoons with my family a year, it might as well have been in Siberia. (We did have electricity and running water!)

The seminary was run according to the rule and spirit of Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. Ignatius was a Spanish gentleman who founded the order in 1521. For all intents and purposes, we were living in an institution that had been created in the Renaissance and had stayed largely the same ever since. Many years later, I came to realize that I had participated in a form of "time travel"—leaving a middle-class, Midwestern life in the 20th century, living four years in a 16th century religious order, and returning again to the 20th century. I suppose those who live for long periods among indigenous people might have the same experience.

Since then and, I believe, because of that experience, I have been fascinated with the incredible social change of the last 400 years—the really big changes like the Protestant Reformation, the invention of the scientific method, the rise of industrial society, democracy, individualism and the rest. So when futurists claim that the Internet is the biggest change in human civilization since the factory, I go, "Whoa, wait a minute! Do you realize how much change you are talking about? Everything changed then—religion, knowledge, work, government, culture. The Internet is important, but, in my experience, not the same magnitude at all." Today my course on Social Change is an exploration of those really big changes and the various ways we explain them to ourselves.

The third major event in my journey (at least as I reconstruct it here) was a few books I read in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The first was Marshall McLuhan. I don't even know which book it was, but he impressed me with the power of technology to change society. And he was talking about television; computers were still room-sized machines. I was preparing to go to graduate school at the time in physics, but the Jesuits thought I needed first to teach for a year. During that year (1968-69), I switched from physics to sociology while I watched the world change right before my eyes—civil rights, Vietnam, rock and roll, drug culture, men walking on the moon. That seemed a lot more interesting than bouncing electrons off each other in a cyclotron, and it has been.

I was a student of social change during my graduate school at Michigan State (1969-73). While I was opposed to war, poverty and discrimination like most people at the time, I didn't have the courage to really put my body on the line. Rather I hung on the periphery, watching others create change. My Master's thesis was a survey of students on their way to Washington DC to protest the war. For my dissertation, a colleague and I trained a group of citizens to assert their rights in running a health planning agency.

There has not been a time like that since then. We thought we were changing the world; we thought that things would never be the same. And they haven't; and yet they have. We are more sensitive to the cost of war today

than we were then, and to civil rights and discrimination. But powerful people still run the world, and they don't do so badly that we rise up against them. The future turned out differently than most people expected, but it still looked remarkably similar in many ways.

I also read the optimistic Toffler (*Future Shock*) on how computers would create a third wave of fundamental change and the pessimistic Meadows et. al. (*Limits to Growth*) on how the current economic system would use up and despoil the planet. I couldn't tell who was right, nor did I try. They both seemed like plausible futures, and yet they were both right and wrong in their own way. We have yet to realize the utopian information society that Toffler predicted, yet a lot has changed in how we live and work as a result of information technology. I was using punch cards to run computers when I read Toffler, now I'm typing on a personal machine that is probably more powerful than the university computer was then.

*The Limits to Growth* grew out of the nascent environmental movement and predicted short-term catastrophe which clearly didn't occur. But the environment is cleaner and safer now than it was then and a thirty-mile per gallon car was a pipe dream at the time. Out of all this, then, I drew the lessons that 1) social change was real, 2) it could happen suddenly, 3) the real outcomes were unpredictable, and 4) a lot still stayed the same. And all that before I saw UH-Clear Lake.

I went to teach sociology at Georgia Southern College (now University) right after graduate school. I had left the seminary in graduate school, but retained my desire to follow my teachers as a teacher if not as a priest. I didn't learn much sociology in graduate school. (With all that going on, who could?) But when I thought about standing up in front of 30 bored undergraduates, I had to figure out what I was going to say and do so as not to embarrass myself or them with my incompetence. I specialized in Social Problems, as close to social change as I got during those years and for many thereafter.

I was recruited to UH-Clear Lake in 1976. A member of the American Sociological Association was running a team of sociologists from southern colleges and universities in a project to improve undergraduate teaching in sociology. He came to Clear Lake in 1974 and had me apply two years later. They didn't teach Social Problems because Clear Lake is an upper division school and Social Problems is a sophomore course. So I took over the research and statistics course for psychology and sociology students.

Not much social change or futures studies in the classroom, but a lot outside it. The first faculty at UH-Clear Lake were all people like myself, rejects from the late 60s and early 70s who had been frustrated by the inertia of the academy. We were going to do something different, start a university unlike any other, offer all those cool courses we wished we could have taken—interdisciplinary, experiential, useful! Our visionary dean encouraged our dreams, and we set to work. It was the 60s all over again! Until...

You don't want to know the details, but by 1981 or so, the dream had died. The university was well on its way to becoming a decent, regional university serving the southeast part of Houston and the greater Gulf Coast. We may have been revolutionaries, but the rest of the faculty, almost all of the students, certainly their parents, their employers, the university administration, the State of Texas, none shared our revolutionary zeal. They wanted a decent, regional university where they could get a decent education and graduate with decent degree so they could get a decent job and get on with their lives. So much for social change at the university level!

At about that time, I had pretty well conquered the research and stat course (it was good!), but I didn't want to become a full-time statistician. I had been attending faculty meetings of a strange group of faculty in futures studies, and I approached them one day with the request to teach their course in forecasting. Even though graduate schools in social science don't teach forecasting (Do you believe that?), I thought I could do it with a little preparation, and I was right.

It wasn't t-tests and ANOVA, but it was still making inferences using observations and data. I had a little trouble getting a handle on this "alternative futures" approach (I thought they were just copping out by not picking one future as the "right" future!), but eventually I came to embrace that to.

Twenty years later (Hasn't anything happened since?), I've been the teaching in and, on and off, been the chair of this program in [Studies of the Future](#) at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. It has been, in every way, the reason I chose sociology over physics; it has allowed me to look deeply into society as it changes; it has given

me the opportunity to carry on a full university life and maintain a private practice of speaking, training and facilitation that I would never have achieved with sociology or with physics. It has given me the chance to help people understand the historical context they are in, to anticipate likely and unlikely changes they are facing and to influence those changes to create a somewhat better future than they would have absent their effort.

My only regret is that I wish that more people were pursuing futures studies as an academic discipline. (Our first dean, Calvin Cannon, quipped at our initial meeting, "We teach the past don't we? Why can't we teach the future, too?") When I joined up, the futures program had three or four faculty who were teaching regularly in the program and another half-dozen teaching occasionally. Now I am the only one.

There were identifiable futures programs and faculty members at the Universities of Hawaii, Massachusetts, Maryland, Akron, Minnesota, Southern California and Portland State. Now the Hawaii and Houston programs are the only ones, and both are staffed by a single, aging futurist. There is a relatively new program in Melbourne, Australia, and parts of programs may be springing up, like the one here at Regent University.

And all the while, the ideas that futurists pioneered thirty years ago are becoming acceptable, even common, today. The term "futurist" is now accepted where it was a term of ridicule. People talk about visioning and scenario planning. Strategic planners and strategists now realize that their plans have to take a changing world into account.

Graduates of the Clear Lake, Hawaii and other programs have formed the new [Association of Professional Futurists](#), an organization that will give a home to the next generation of futurists just as the founders retire. So go figure--the perennial death and rebirth in this strange cycle we call life.

#### **Related Links**

Dr. Peter Bishop, resume,  
<http://www.cl.uh.edu/futureweb/faculty/bishop.html>

"Studies of the Future Program," University of Houston-ClearLake,  
<http://hsh.cl.uh.edu/futureweb/>

**Join us at Regent University for our Next Foresight Conference**  
<http://www.regent.edu/acad/sls/conferences/home.htm>