

My Life as a Futurist

A Personal Essay

Foresight 2004 Conference - September 2004

Jennifer Jarratt, Principal
Leading Futurists, LLC; Washington, DC

From September 23-25, 2004, the School of Leadership Studies hosted Jennifer Jarratt on campus at Regent University, for the second annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay 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.



Jennifer Jarratt

*is co-founder of Leading Futurists, a consulting firm that helps organizations anticipate and detect early signals of change so they can maintain their competitive edge. She holds a M.S. in Studies of the Future from the University of Houston-Clear Lake, and is chairperson of the Association of Professional Futurists. She has been working as a futurist since 1984 and is author of several books, including *From Scan to Plan: Integrating Trends into the Strategy-Making Process* (American Society of Association Executives, 2003).*

Essay

Isn't life amazing? I didn't know I was going to be a futurist when I was a child. As far as I knew there wasn't such a thing. My connections to the future in those days were science fiction writers whose books and Galaxy magazine stories my brother and I devoured in our attic bedrooms. These were people with strange (to us) names like Isaac Asimov, Frederick Pohl, and A.E. Van Vogt. I remember the fantastic name of Asimov's robot, R. Daneel Olivaw. He struck me as a remarkable character at the time because he wasn't human and yet he had a life, goals, morals, and adventures.

We read the books of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells too. I've always been fascinated by time and the way in which we can in our imagination move into the past and future and explore a unique perspective from those viewpoints. I loved the play with time in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, and in J. B. Priestley's play, *An Inspector Calls*.

In those days, however, science fiction seemed something of a men's club, with only male heroes and masculine goals. Later on I read Alexei Panshin's *Rite of Passage*, which is an award winning science fiction novel about a young girl's coming of age in a distant community of spaceships and space colonies.

Before I was a teenager though, Harrison Brown had published *The Challenge of Man's Future* (1954). I didn't read it until I was a graduate student at the University of Houston Clear Lake futures studies program in the early 1980s. What struck me then was that he, a scientist, had grasped early on the interrelationships of everyone and everything on this planet we are all living on.

In England in the 1950s people were optimistic about the future on the one hand and convinced on the other that first the atomic and then the hydrogen bomb would wipe out civilization as we knew it within the next 25 years. That belief haunted me and others into our twenties and led us to believe that we didn't have a future.

Our other optimistic glimpse forward as children was the 1951 Festival of Britain, which like the New York World's Fair of 1939, projected enthusiasm about the future of science and technology. I have to admit that as a child I loved the cartoonist Rowland Emmet's scenic railway the best. I didn't know then that Emmet was a futurist. I believe most artists are. You'll rarely see an obvious finger pointed at the future from an artist, however, their view of the future is usually subtle and indirect. Emmet made fun of it. If you want to see his work, from my online search I found that the Ontario Science Center has his Moon-probe Lunacycle MAUD (Manually Activated Universal Deviator), and the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry has his Borg-Warner Vintage Car of the Future stashed somewhere. Even the Smithsonian has something of his tucked away in storage.

For a long period in my life I didn't have much to do with the future. The present and the past interested me more. I acquired a social conscience as a consequence of a Quaker education. Only when I heard and read the Quaker futurist, Elise Boulding, years later did I realize that the same spiritual competence I'd observed in long-time Quakers could be used to explore and describe the future. Dr. Boulding, who describes herself as a sociologist rather than a futurist, has done years of work in helping communities envisage a peaceful world as the first step in shaping the way towards that positive future.

From her I also learned the idea of the "200-year present," which is a moving timespace that looks backward and covers our own immediate history and the stories and messages handed down from our grand and great-grandparents and then forward to the continuity and sense of family that we will hand down to our children, grand, and great-grandchildren.

I also acquired ordinary skills that would enable me to work and make a living as a journalist, in the UK first, then after 1965, in the United States. What an education that was! Working on the narrow frontier between the present and the immediate past, trying to record it and capture it and tell people about it is enormously exciting even if the story you are reporting is only a local flower show or a simple court case.

It was a stimulating life to someone like me who has a short attention span at the best of times. And at times that everyday ordinary frontier will erupt with a disastrous or a shocking event that has to be absorbed, explored, captured and told like everything else. People want to be reassured as much as they want to be shocked by what they read and see in the media. Getting it right and getting it accurately told was what I learned and have relied on ever since.

Given its assignment to cover the present and the short-term past, the media in general isn't much interested in the future. I was always in trouble for trying to write features on things "that haven't happened yet." Some journalists and magazine writers have managed to carve out a futures "beat." I didn't. Even in the best of the media's work on the future today there is often a wink and a nudge "You don't really believe this, do you?"

If it is difficult to write scenarios about the future, it is even more difficult to create images of the future in film and video that are wholly different and wholly believable. Although people in these images may be living in futuristic buildings and have superb technology at their fingertips they still often have the values and attitudes of today, or values and attitudes that are somehow cold, jaded, or entirely utilitarian.

The makers of movies about the future, we are told, take the advice of futurists. I don't think they follow it, and why should they? Their job is entertainment, not reporting.

I wasn't trying to get a futures education at first when I went to college, just to learn and enjoy the experience of being at a university. The courses and subjects that Wayne State University expected an undergraduate to take seemed so dull and endless that I was soon looking for an opportunity to take a less formal educational path.

I was lucky enough to find the Union of Experimental Colleges, and Goddard College's Adult Degree Program, which led me into an experience that was anarchic, creative, and wholly satisfying. Of course, it was the early 1970s. Our graduation was held in a garden, with my instructor, the artist David Zahn, reading the master's farewell to his pupil from Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery*.

My next few years of work after graduation, part of it in public relations and communications for a non-profit, did not have much to do with the future. There is no doubt in my mind now that we could have used more thorough anticipation as well as a more informed and comprehensive view of the future. Non-profits tend to be more reactive than they need to be. It can make them dependent on where the money is, regardless of whether that enables them to be on target with their services and advocacy.

The cutbacks on social enterprises that came with the Reagan administration left me, looking for something new to do.

I had heard about a graduate degree in studies of the future from a speechwriting course I took in New York. I interviewed all the futurists I could find, including those who worked for the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future, in Washington, DC. This looked interesting! So I packed everything and drove to Houston and the University of Houston Clear Lake.

There was a wonderful sense in the futures studies program of doing things others were not doing, hearing about ideas and thoughts that others were not hearing, and learning about a perspective on the world that others did not see. That came with some difficulties, however, since it challenged our commonly accepted views of the world.

I was reminded of Herrigel's master, who said, "I must only warn you of one thing. You have become a different person in the course of these years....you will feel it very strongly when you meet your friends and acquaintances again in your own country: things will no longer harmonize as before. You will see with other eyes and measure with other measures."

Herrigel goes on to say that this happens to "all who are touched by the spirit of this art." He meant archery and Zen, of course. I mean futures thinking, which is to my mind an art, even though we attempt to give it more legitimacy by calling it a science.

This experience was reinforced for me later when I returned to UHCL as a visiting instructor in 1990-91, and heard a futures student say that since she had been in the program her fellow workers brought her their difficult problems because they believed she "thought differently," and thus would have a fresh perspective on their difficulties.

I must confess I got through the difficulties of graduate school by windsurfing almost every afternoon on Clear Lake and Mud Lake near the university. My other supports came from Peter Bishop's creative and inventive approach to teaching the future, Chris Dede's clear-eyed idea of how systems worked and what we needed to do get our systems of values and ethics to mesh with our increasing powers in technology and science.

I argued with Oliver Markley more than once over the practical and ethical issues that arise when futurists work with visioning, the extrasensory, and the various capacities of the mind. However it was during his course that several of us came together to envision our own future and the future of our communities. We went on meeting for months after the course was over and included people who hadn't attended the course who were curious about this new experience.

A great opportunity was attending one of the Mitchell conferences at the Woodlands, and listen to the proponents of nuclear energy and the advocates of sustainable energy debate each other. Also, through a summer course organized by Peter Bishop, we visited corporations and organizations in Houston to discover

how they looked at the future, through models, strategic thinking, turning point analysis, and so on. I enjoyed being an intern-for-a-day at NASA, listening while a team planned for the future of spaceflight.

“The Classics of Futures Thinking” course, taught by Oliver Markley, brought me into contact with the thinking of Fred Polak, in his book, *The Image of the Future*, Vols. I & II. I looked for years for my own copies of these volumes—long out of print. Last year my friend Alison Classe found them and sent them to me and I have them in front of me as I write this.

A quote from Polak: “The challenge of the future waits, none too patiently, at our very door. If we do not hasten to answer it, we may lose both our freedom to give an answer and our future too.”

Polak expresses the urgency of the future for all of us. Most futurists feel that urgency, but they tend to feel it and express it in much longer timeframes than society, or the average organization, can easily handle.

For me, anyway, the Houston program was the springboard into life as a full-time futurist, for which I’m grateful. I began as an intern with Joe Coates in Washington, DC in the early 1980s and continue there today as a principal of Leading Futurists, LLC, which is the small futures consulting firm John B. Mahaffie, and I founded.

I took a year off to go back to Houston in 1990-91 as a visiting instructor in the futures program while Oliver Markley took his own sabbatical. I highly recommend an opportunity to share what you have learned. You find out quickly through the eyes and reactions of the students what’s useful and what is not. It is interesting that people learn and people teach and the two activities are not necessarily dovetailed with one another.

The students who I met and worked with that year wanted to be around someone who had hands-on experience in the futures field. The student learns from the teacher’s practice. I had a great time that year, was able to work with some excellent students and colleagues and learn about more about how I perform as a futurist. As Pelé said: “Everything is practice.”

In Seminar, which is the final course for the degree, we decided to run our own Professional Futures Forum event, with invited participants. It was a heart-in-the-mouth experience for us, as a first professional offering to the Houston community from the program. We had the backing of the World Future Society. On the day, the event was intense and highly successful, thanks to everyone’s work on it. In the following years, futures students picked up the event and ran with it for several more successful years.

Joe Coates, who is one of the most energetic and prolific futurists, created many opportunities for those who worked with him to publish. While I was away in Houston, the folks back in Washington, including Andy Hines and John Mahaffie, completed the work on the 15 scenarios that became the book *2025*. Earlier, we had written the book *What Futurists Believe*, which was an analysis of the beliefs of 17 futurists who were of interest to a group of our corporate clients. The 17 were all men. They didn’t all think of themselves as futurists, but they were all leaders in their fields. Why didn’t we include any women? We had to have futurists with published works we could analyze, who were likely to be willing to participate, at least minimally, and they had to be interesting to us and to our group of clients. The only woman this net of criteria captured was the late Donella Meadows and she was too busy and wanted no part of us. I think now that this approach of collecting, comparing, and criticizing the published works among a selected group almost always would include more men than women, whatever the field.

We were great environmental scanners at Coates & Jarratt. We always had a scan going. It was the foundation for our knowledge base on the future. I don’t remember how many scans I’ve worked on in the last 20 years, but our work on trends influencing the future of human resources enabled us to write the book *Future Work*. We did an environmental scan of trends affecting associations for the American Society of Association Executives Foundation that the ASAE published in 1994 as *Managing Your Future as an Association*.

In 2003, John Mahaffie and I completed another scan for the ASAE Foundation with a co-author, Jim Dalton. This one, *From Scan to Plan*, recognizes what all organizations know, that good information is useless unless it

can be integrated into operations and strategy, and therefore includes a six-step process to get from scanning to planning—also known as strategy-making.

The world of business futures over the years has evolved into the search for, and interpreting of, information that can be worked into a business or organizational purpose. John Mahaffie and I, in *Leading Futurists*, want to work with organizations that will take this information about the future a step further and use it to cultivate the habits of foresight. To do this means replacing the current culture of past, present, and next-quarter-sight with one of foresight, a change that sometimes seems as huge as the introduction of oxygen into earth's atmosphere eons ago.

Nick Marsh, Mike McAllum, and Dominique Purcell talk about “releasing the foresight virus,” in their book, *Strategic Foresight: The Power of Standing in the Future* (2002). They too see the habit of foresight as a change many in organizations will resist, unless they can be shown that the premise on which they base their operating principles is no longer true.

Marsh, McAllum and Purcell reflect on Kurt Lewin's conclusion that for change in organizations to occur, people's established ideas have to be “unfrozen,” new ideas introduced, then the new ideas “refrozen” into conventional wisdom as stability returns. I first heard of Lewin's work in a course on planned change with Ron Lippitt at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan in the 1960s. Lewin's ideas seemed remarkable to me at the time, and I'm grateful to him and to Ron Lippitt for knowledge about how groups and organizations encounter and manage change. Today, though, I believe it is unlikely that any conventional wisdom and stability will hold for long in any organization because operating conditions change continuously, and sometimes discontinuously. The process of introducing and managing change has to be integrated into the system.

Organizations will often resist futurists and futurists inside an organization can sometimes have a poor organizational fit. Part of the reason may be because they do not think in the same way as their colleagues. Michael Kirton's *Adaptation Innovation assessment (KAI)*, is useful in differentiating between different thinking and problem solving styles. With the KAI instrument, I've assessed the cognitive styles of many futurists and people who work with innovation and research. They are remarkably similar in cognitive style.

The many different cognitive styles can be plotted along a continuum. Futurists tend to be at one end of that continuum. The older, the larger, and the more complex the organization, the more likely it is to have a majority of people whose cognitive preference is for incremental rather than radical change. This is at the other end of the continuum from the typical futurist. People whose preference for how to fix a problem is to toss the current structure out of the window, often do not get on well with those whose first choice is to improve what has already been achieved and to use the current structure to achieve it.

Fortunately in the last few years, as the leaders of organizations recognize that tomorrow's world will need new thinking, futurists and those who think like them are more valued for their ability to rethink problems and create new solutions. This change in attitude is by no means universal or even widely held, of course. It's a niche that groups like the new Association of Professional Futurists (APF) hope to expand and develop, creating more opportunities for professional futurists to make their unique contributions.

I've learned from a lot of people in my life as a futurist. I can't mention them all but I'm grateful. I read Andy Hines' article from *Regent's Foresight 2003*, “My Journey as a Futurist,” and I appreciate what he said about me. We were colleagues once and we are working together again as chair and Executive Director of the APF. Andy is one of the most gifted and creative futurists I know. He's an energetic risk-taker too, plunging into new things with the abandon of a child into the pool on the first day of summer.

Futures practice is changing as we, along with everyone else, acquire the tools of the Internet and the global reach that online communications brings. The APF started out as an international association, and I hope it grows and develops as one. There are futurists practicing everywhere around the world. I invite you to join us a student, provisional or full member, where ever you are at in your leadership journey into foresight (<http://www.profuturists.org>).

My business partner, John Mahaffie, is the most important person in my current life as a futurist. We've had a successful working relationship now for almost 20 years and I learn from him and from his unique approach to the future every day. John understands how people and organizations, their technologies, their values and their aspirations fit together and function better than anyone I know. He also explains the future and how to engage with its challenges in an entertaining and straightforward way that resonates with people.

We've done a lot of work with scenarios in recent years and we are working on what we hope will be a book on how to create them and use them to illuminate and explore the future.

The future, after all, is a shared enterprise. We can't succeed in it without collaborating on what needs to be done. I'll give my last words to Elise Boulding, who said:

“Society does not exist apart from the activities that sustain, shape, and reshape it.”

Related Links

Leading Futurists, LCC

<http://www.leadingfuturists.biz>

Association of Professional Futurists

<http://www.profuturists.org>

Join Us for the next Foresight Conference,

<http://www.regent.edu/acad/sls/conferences/home.htm>