

# How I Discovered the Future

## A Personal Essay

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Foresight 2005 Conference - September

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Infinite Futures, Oxford, England

From September 22-24, 2005, the School of Leadership Studies hosted Dr. Wendy Schultz on campus at Regent University, for the third annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay by Schultz 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 both the U.S. and around the world.

*Dr. Schultz earned her MA and PhD in Alternative Futures (Political Science) from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where she was also a Research Associate for ten years with the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies. She served as Visiting Faculty for five years with the MS program in Studies of the Future at the University of Houston – Clear Lake, after which she received a Fulbright grant for six months of teaching and research at the Finland Futures Research Center of the Turku School of Economics and Business Administration. She currently consults in foresight and futures studies with various departments in the UK government, and sits on the executive boards of the European Futurists Conference Lucerne, the Association of Professional Futurists, and the World Futures Studies Federation.*



### Essay

When I was about nine, I was on vacation with my family at a [fishing camp](#) on Long Lake in the wilds of Maine. My mother and father and I went across the lake one afternoon to fuel the boat and buy some groceries at the general store / post office / marina. A voracious reader, I was looking for more books to devour, and on a small revolving stand found a novel with a garish cover by A.E. Van Vogt, *Mission to the Stars* (original title: *The Mixed Men*). This actually turned out to be two novels, as the book was an Ace science fiction “double.” So began my enchantment with the future.

Four themes informed my journey to futures studies: images of the future; creativity and innovation; crossing boundaries and worldviews; and fellowship. My parents launched me on this journey. They were the most ordinary of Americans; they were the most extraordinary of individuals. I used to say that I represented the statistically average American: born into a mid-western, middle class WASP family of 2.5 children (I’m the last, and shortest, child) who moved once every seven years and lived on the median American income. But my parents were outliers in their curiosity, their creativity, and their encouragement for reading and travel and meeting new people and experiencing new cultures.

Roger and Wendy (I was named after my mother) were deeply involved with the Presbyterian church as communicants teachers, camp counselors, and Deacons. One of my earliest cross-cultural experiences was giving up my bedroom for the use of a young South Korean minister and his wife who were visiting our church: I still remember how like a flower she looked in her bell-shaped silk traditional dress. My parents' involvement in the Presbyterian church, and by extension my involvement as a child, instilled in me an early appreciation for fellowship and community.

An extrovert widely involved in community activities like the Women's League, my mother was a great role model for effective networking, team-building, and creating participatory group processes; she found other cultures fascinating, not frightening. My father, working for National Cash Register Company at the time of the great analog-to-digital transition, was entranced by technology and gadgets. His fascination was matched by his facility in fixing things, taking them apart, and building incredible little devices out of sheets of aluminum, wiring, switches, and other electronic odds and ends – I remember one gadget that would turn on lights with simply the wave of my hand over a sensor pad. That's nothing now, but in 1965 it was absolutely space age. We both enjoyed watching "Discovery '66", an innovations-and-science TV show aimed at kids, and it was this environment that addicted me to innovation and invention.

It was also my parents' attitude that everyone should be handy at everything – whether cooking, sewing (my Dad could do both), or carpentry, plumbing, and changing the oil on your car (my sisters and I could be found down in Dad's workshop just as often as in the kitchen with Mom baking bread) – that meant I was raised in a fairly neutral environment when it came to gender-based expectations. They believed everyone should be a self-reliant problem-solver, which was why they stressed education, reading, creativity, building, exploration, and innovation. The fact that my oldest sister was terrific at puzzles and a wonderful musician, and my middle sister a natural mediator and a fine artist, provided me with active models of the values my parents espoused.

But before you get too much of an impression that Roger and Wendy were urban geek technophiles, I should mention that vacations to them meant not only traveling and seeing more of the world – usually by popping us all in the station wagon, equipped with plenty of sandwiches and fruit and cookies, and heading out on the highways and country roads – but specifically seeing more of the natural world, spending time at cabins on lakes and rivers where Dad could fish and hunt and the rest of us hike and explore and enjoy trout on toast for breakfast. So my love of nature and my appreciation for the intricate and complex systems of the living environment come also from my parents.

Which brings us back to that cottage in Maine, and my discovery of science fiction: I quickly moved from that book to science fiction classics written by Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Poul Anderson, and others, and then on to the more experimental, social- and psychologically based works by authors like Harlan Ellison, Ursula LeGuin, and John Brunner. My forays into the future were also encouraged by the unique educational environment of Allentown, Pennsylvania; when we lived there, it had one of the highest-rated elementary school systems in the nation. The accelerated program into which I was tracked included Spanish, theatre, and typing – beginning in the fourth grade. My classes featured children from all over the city, from all income groups, and from a wide variety of cultures; I always thought it was vaguely unfair that the Buddhist, Islamic, and Jewish kids seemed to get so many religious holidays in addition to the ones I got to take! This extraordinary curriculum included a deep emphasis on the arts and all forms of human communication, leading to my love of theatre.

Alas, when I was in sixth grade we moved to Dayton, Ohio, and in so doing went from one of the top rated school systems in the country to a state rated 49 out of 50 for quality of education. It was quite a shock, and threw me back on my own resources until I could escape to college. By the time I was applying to undergraduate schools, my interest in theatre, particularly technical theatre – lighting, stage design, etc. – had morphed into an interest in media. Consequently I applied at only two schools, both of which had extensive TV and media departments: Stephens College (Missouri) and Michigan State University. On a campus visit to MSU I was invited to a briefing at Justin Morrill College (JMC), a residential liberal arts program operating within MSU. I was attracted to its small classes, intensive emphasis on research and writing, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural focus, and freedom to design unique degree programs. Given that I'd also fallen in love with the Michigan State campus, the choice was easy.

[Justin Morrill](#) (now, sadly, defunct) proved everything it had promised: the best of the faculty in MSU taught there, as they too enjoyed the small classes and more intense pedagogical experience. My advisor, Prof. John Reid, taught English and media, and ran JMC's small TV lab. Spring semester of my freshman year I enrolled in his video production course, and Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was a required text. I loved it; nobody else even seemed to comprehend it. Because of John and McLuhan, my major veered off into an exploration of technological innovation and social change, which eventually was titled, "Philosophy, technology, and social change."

I built my field of concentration (JMC parlance for the set of courses composing your major) from courses as varied as "Conversations on Modern Physics," taught by Henry Blosser, director of MSU's Cyclotron Laboratory, and "Social Development Theory," taught by Prof. John Useem in sociology. Not to mention economic history, "Diffusion of Innovation" from the communications department, and a range of eccentric independent studies. Basically, from the seed of McLuhan emerged two foci for my interests: 1) the study of technological change and the critique of technological change, especially as embodied by the counterculture (eg, Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, Theodore Roszak); and 2) the study of social change and societal / civilizational development (eg, Rostow, Marx, Peter Berger, EF Schumacher, and Mesarovic and Pestel). The environmental critiques of technological society by writers such as Lester Brown, Rachel Carson, and Harrison Brown, as well as Mesarovic and Pestel's *The Limits to Growth*, were my first introduction to systems thinking.

One thing became clear: a degree in "Philosophy, Technology, and Social Change" was not a fast ticket to a hot job. I mulled this over while on field study in my fourth year (JMC's emphasis on cross-cultural studies was operationalized as a requirement for a term abroad), which I spent in London working for the Natural Energy Centre, a small non-profit based on EF Schumacher's "appropriate technology" philosophy. The NEC designed installations which decreased the energy and ecological footprint of public institutions, corporations, and individuals. This was probably the height of my counter-cultural, environmental radical phase.

By my fourth year at MSU, I noticed that the books I found most interesting were labeled with the keyword "future studies." You may find many of them on your [Classic Texts](#) reading list. So I began hunting for more examples of futures studies, and discovered that not only were there graduate programs, but also that MSU itself had a course or two on the topic. One was a brilliant overview of the emerging field, taught as a graduate seminar in the education department by Prof. Peggy Riethmiller. Among Prof. Riethmiller's required readings was an essay by a political science professor at the University of Hawaii, [Jim Dator](#). It provoked me. It was designed to: as radical in its thinking as many of the counterculture and ecological tracts, it focused instead on the complete transformation of reality via technological innovation *and the impact that would have on the values by which we judged what was a good life.*

So of course when I applied to graduate school (as no hot jobs awaited my BA in philosophy, technology, and social change), I applied to [Jim Dator's program in Hawaii](#), as well as to the futures program in Minnesota. When applying to Hawaii, I simultaneously applied to the [East-West Center](#) (EWC) for a graduate student scholarship. Much to my parents pleasure, I was awarded a grant for four years of Ph.D. studies; much to my pleasure, it included not only tuition, but also airfare, housing, stipend, and book allowance. Housing was critical, as it is a scarce and expensive commodity in Hawaii; as it turned out, life in the East-West Center dorms was a cross-cultural educational experience to rival my undergraduate term abroad.

The East-West Center is a think-tank focussed on "cultural and technical interchange between East and West," based adjacent to the University of Hawaii campus in Manoa Valley. Its activities include ongoing research projects, conference and seminar organization, and providing research fellowships and degree scholarships primarily to students and professionals within the Pacific Basin and Pacific Rim. Thus my housemates in Hale Kuahine included women from Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan, and Papua New Guinea. And that was only a small sample of the culturally diverse community that is the EWC.

EWC scholarships required us to join one of the ongoing research projects; at the time the Center was divided into topical research institutes, of which I was a participant of the Resource Systems Institute, directed by Dr. Harrison Brown. But it was Dr. Fereidun Fesharaki who became my EWC mentor, as he recruited me to work on the OPEC Downstream Project he had just begun, which was tracking changes in the global petroleum market. I became the project expert on global natural gas reserves, production, and trade, with a specialty in LNG

(liquefied natural gas) trade. My work with the OPEC Downstream Project in energy forecasting served as the internship required for the MA in Alternative Futures.

I went to Hawaii specifically to study with Jim Dator; I had no particular interest in Political Science, which is the department in which the futures program in Hawaii is located. In fact, I had no previous political science courses at the time I entered the program. The first semester I had absolutely no clue what people were talking about most of the time – except in Dator’s futures graduate seminar, where I discovered the community and the conversation for which I’d been searching. And discovered as well that, like his essay, Dr. Dator was brilliant, funny, and provocative – and a major fan of McLuhan as well.

The political science department at the time I entered it was strongly neo-Marxist, with discussions focused on neo-colonialism, dependencia, liberation theology, center-periphery analysis, and the world economic system. Over the sixteen years I was affiliated with the department that segued (as intellectual cultures do) into a new set of theories and concepts, most notably hermeneutic analysis, critical literary theory, and post-modernism. My interest evolved from critique of the world system, to critique of the critiques, many of which I found too focused at the institutional level, with too little attention paid to the role of individuals. Futures studies, as Sohail Inayatullah points out, problematizes the present: it offers a unique vantage point from which to observe the past, the present, and ongoing change.

The [World Futures Studies Federation](#) (WFSF), the global academic community of futures researchers, embodied in its cross-cultural dialogue this spirit of comparative critique of the past and the present. Just as all Jim’s graduate students got email accounts at the dawn of the internet age (oh, how I wish I were still simply wendy@hawaii.edu!), all Jim’s graduate students joined the WFSF. Many of us attended the spring WFSF seminars in Dubrovnik, Croatia, during the years they were offered (I went so often I evolved into the course director for the last two years; see “Futures Amid Stone Palaces,” *Futures Research Quarterly*, Winter 1992, Vol. 8, No. 4, for a history of the Dubrovnik courses). My first Dubrovnik seminar confirmed that futures studies was the correct choice of my life’s interest: I felt a sense of fellowship and community – I may have disagreed with some participant’s ideas, but I like them all very much. And I valued how their cultural and philosophical differences enabled me to see my own biases and weaknesses more clearly.

Prof. Glenn Paige – known for his work in both peace research and political leadership – provided me at last with a strong conceptual link between political science and futures studies: leadership studies. James MacGregor Burns’ *Leadership* offered me the concept of transformational leadership defined by a vision of a preferred future, which I could connect to Polak’s seminal futures work *The Image of the Future*. This became the germ of my Ph.D. dissertation, “Futures Fluency: Explorations in leadership, vision, and creativity.” It would take me a dozen years to sit down and actually write it, but it underlay and drove all of my subsequent interests and research work.

Summing up the sixteen years of my graduate studies and subsequent research in Hawaii is a task beyond the scope of this bio; [my cv](#) offers a quick flyby of the projects in which I was involved. My last ten years in Hawaii I was first a research assistant, and then a research associate, with the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, and the Center for Development Studies, both of which were located in the Social Science Research Institute. Substantively, this heralded a shift from research on the world natural gas market, to futures-focused policy and planning work within the state of Hawaii, the US as a whole, and throughout the Pacific Basin. My primary mentors during this time – in addition to Jim Dator – were Dr. Michael Hamnett, a Pacific Basin policy expert who ran the Center for Development Studies, and Prof. Kem Lowry, in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at UH. Both were experts in the dynamics of public policy and decision-making, as well as superb natural facilitators: facilitation proved a cornerstone skill for my evolving interest in leadership and vision.

Applying futures studies and foresight tools and techniques in a wide variety of policy settings taught me the critical roles of translation, facilitation, and communication: futures researchers must *translate* critical concepts and issues of change, acting as a conduit between technical experts and policy-makers and their constituents; futures researchers must *facilitate* foresight thinking and dialogue among all stakeholders to create robust possibilities for positive human futures; and futures researchers should try to communicate both

the emerging issues of change, the questions they raise, and the dialogue that results, as clearly and in as many formats as possible.

The great synthesis of all these stimuli was catalyzed by Dr. Elise Boulding, who was invited to UH by the Peace Institute to facilitate an “Imaging the Future as a World Without Weapons” workshop. Dr. Boulding – who had translated Polak’s *The Image of the Future* into English – used visioning preferred futures to spark dialogue about action now to reduce violence. I participated in her three-day visioning workshop, and began to work on a set of exercises and conceptual tools that would enhance leadership skills. An immediate offshoot of this was my work with Dr. Clement Bezold (Institute for Alternative Futures) and the State Justice Institute to create a visioning manual for state courts. This manual proved the beta run for my dissertation, which combined the concepts of leadership, ideology and images of the future, foresight, and vision to suggest that leadership could be taught as a skill, empowering more creative, transformational social change from the ground up.

As part of writing my dissertation, I also had to formulate a clear description of futures studies itself, as context for those members of my committee unacquainted with the field. You may read this (now archaic) chapter online, [Defining Futures Fluency](#). In all my activities since I have tried to refine and clarify that initial statement; indeed, my five years’ association with the University of Houston – Clear Lake’s (UHCL) Masters program In Studies of the Future was one continuous attempt to refine my conceptualization of futures studies, the better to convey it to students. My work there with Dr. Peter Bishop and Dr. Oliver Markley, from 1996 to 2001, included creating several original graduate seminars, revising others, and re-organizing the program curriculum. Descriptions of the seminars I taught are [available online](#). Obviously, I was able to indulge not only my long-running interest in images of the future, with a course focused entirely on the identification, analysis, and building of images of the future, but also to implement my emphasis on facilitation as a skill. The facilitation course was widely praised by students as one of the most useful courses they’d ever had.

But how did I get to Houston from Hawaii? Via Oxford: in 1994, my partner, Jay Lewis (Japanese and Korean history Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii) accepted the position of Korea Foundation Lecturer in Korean Studies at the University of Oxford, and we relocated to the United Kingdom. Peter Bishop and Oliver Markley invited me to join the UHCL Studies of the Future program as visiting faculty in 1996, two years after I’d moved to Oxford. We so enjoyed our working relationship that we managed to shuffle resources to maintain my one-year visiting professorship to over four (counting summer sessions). I did a lot of transatlantic commuting, but it was more than worth it – again, for the fellowship and sense of community with other professionals and with students, as much as for the intellectual stimulation. Also, my years at UHCL taught me that I love to teach.

My transition to permanent residence back in the UK included a six-month visit with colleagues at the Finland Futures Research Centre, supported by a Fulbright grant. My colleagues and I traded concepts, terms, research tools, and curriculum resources, and I only fell on my rear once on the ice-slicked winter pavements. All in all, a success. Which brings me to life as a consultant in the United Kingdom. Here I have been working with colleagues on a variety of projects for government and business. At the moment, most of those projects involve identifying change: environmental scanning, annotation, and database design for the Department of Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, and the Office of Science and Technology); advisory work on [Shaping Tomorrow](#), and presentations at a variety of conferences. Examples can be found at my website, [Infinite Futures](#).

I look forward to sharing experiences, ideas, readings, and conversation with all of you.

### **Related Links**

Infinite Futures  
<http://www.infinitefutures.com>

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

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