

# Diary of a Temponaut: God Comes to Us from the Future

## A Personal Essay

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From September 20-22, 2006, the School of Global Leadership and Entrepreneurship hosted Rev. Tom Hoffmann on campus at Regent University, for the fourth annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay by Hoffmann was circulated to participants beforehand. We encourage you to join us for our annual Foresight conferences, as we hear from top futurists from the both the U.S. and around the world.



### ***That Which Is to Come***

As a child growing up in the 1960s, I often spent the summer months at my grandparent's lakeshore home located in the forests of northeastern Wisconsin. The typical wilderness activities were punctuated by occasional visits to the town library. On the first visit of each season I would make a bee-line to one shelf in particular and take from it a single volume: "Little Pilgrim's Progress," Helen Taylor's children's version of the Bunyan classic. Thus armed, I would throw myself into her tale of a young boy (just my age?) making a detailed journey away from the City of Destruction and toward a wonderful land beyond imagination. It was not dullness that prevented me from recognizing the book's in-your-face allegory of the Christian faith over the years. Rather, as Dr. Peter Bishop would say in his future studies classes, "Religion offers compelling images of the future." I was thoroughly captivated by the picture being painted not only of the adventure that was taxing poor little Christian's natural abilities, but also of the amazing future that pulled him through every difficulty. Bunyan's original title says it best: "The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come." At that early age in northern Wisconsin I purposed to find my true reality only in That Which Is to Come.

No wonder I still have my comic books from that era. They fed my interest in worlds far more interesting than the one I lived in. And they created untold possibilities for viewing my own world differently. For example, I could explain to you in careful scientific detail exactly how it is that Superman can fly backwards into the past and forwards into the future. Television shows such as *Time Tunnel*, *The Outer Limits*, *Twilight Zone*, and *Star Trek* kept time travel and futuring scenarios alive and robust. Fantasy and science fiction soon were added as a staple reading diet of my teenage years, and these genres continue

to serve as a source for plausible (and not so plausible) scenarios of the future. Works such as C.S. Lewis' space trilogy convinced me even as an adolescent that the far future is always connected to the deep past. A range of other such writers completely destroyed for me (philosophically speaking) any notion of the linear forward-moving arrow of time. Time was far too interesting and complex to trust such a simple metaphor. By the age of 16, the search had already begun in earnest for an alternative reality.

### ***Magical Mystery Tour***

Part of my search was fueled by a familial "Cloud of Unknowing." I was raised a Christian Scientist, and Christian Science (CS) has a very unique and decidedly mystical view of life and religion. Since materialism—including time—is unreal, then so is our experience of it, goes the CS belief system. The only Truth, therefore, lies in a spiritual and timeless realm. This worldview combined with both my childhood experiences at church of unexplained medical healings and a family history of nighttime dreams coming true. I was therefore quite open to a more mystical explanation for life. Eventually, along with thousands of other young persons in the US and Canada, I "turned East" to make sense out of all of this. By age 18 I found myself in an ashram as a disciple of the Harvard psychology professor-turned-Hindu-master Baba Ram Dass. As a Hindu, with millions of lives to complete before achieving my Ultimate Liberation, past and future lost all meaning for me. To fully "Be Here Now" became my only task at hand.

My days at the ashram were highly prescribed. We as a community were not allowed to speak or to make eye contact with each other or to touch anyone. We woke at 2:00 am for an hour of meditation. Then after a few more hours of sleep we woke again at 6:00 am for another of prayer, followed by hatha yoga. Following breakfast, we practiced kundalini yoga under the tutelage of the Master.

Kundalini yoga is an attempt to personally channel shakti (the energy of the universe) up through the chakras (spiritual centers in the body) in order to accelerate spiritual liberation. From the perspective of Hinduism, it's like trying to consume live fireworks. From our subjective experiences, the shakti of kundalini yoga caused out-of-body experiences and sometimes knocked persons over. It often felt like a dramatic and verifiable expression of God's universal power.

This was followed by lunch, maintenance jobs around the ashram, private prayer and meditation, and one-on-one meetings with the Master. After supper, we spent three hours in various forms of group meditation, eventually finishing with an hour of singing and chanting. Our day ended at 11 pm, and began again the next morning at 2 pm. Again, the point of this was to remove from our awareness both past and future, and to discover the detachment of living in "the Now."

### ***The Prophetic Task***

Having shared a common "New Age" spiritual journey, the Master gave permission for Nancy and I to be married at the mature age of 20 years. We immediately went to the top of the prayer list of a Roman Catholic friend. His witness helped propel us into a Christian conversion that was nurtured by the Jesus People movement of the 1970s. What a joy to discover as an adult the biblical source of my favorite childhood story.

My call to full-time church service happened soon after my conversion, and Oral Roberts University (ORU) in Tulsa, OK, became the place to train me for pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Church. ORU in the early 1980s was a fascinating mix of charismatics, Pentecostals, mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics and eastern Orthodox professors and students. It was also the perfect place to view my mystical experiences and history through the lens a prayerful, analytical, and ecumenical Christian community.

At ORU the study of eschatology recovered my passion for looking into the far future. The study of hermeneutics recovered my interest in the deep past. There were also some unexpected discoveries. For example, my focus on the Old Testament and the Hebrew language first introduced to me the concept of

qualitative measurement, a critical component of futures work. Also, constructs of time were at the front of many discussions (e.g., the Canaanite cycle vs. the Hebraic spiral). I was able to embrace multiple understandings of the role of seers and visionaries whose dreams (like my family's) also tended to come true. And, I was allowed to fully explore the prophetic task -- the Judeo-Christian tradition of placing foretelling and forth telling in a dynamic and creative tension. My honors work explored the unique thread of the magical that wove itself through the history of Qabalistic Judaism, and which mystically reinterpreted the role of the prophet.

### ***Quantum Flux***

Most of my ministry as a pastor has been involved with students. In the 1990s while working at our denomination's state headquarters it became clear to me that paradigms and modalities for the future of the church were largely static, as well as ignorant of what appeared to be important generational shifts. Two colleagues had just discovered the World Future Society largely by accident. They suggested that an emerging discipline called "futures studies" might provide insights into understanding generational and social change, as well as providing paradigms for the future of the church.

Launching out on my own, futures studies began to radically change my scope of ministry. Strauss and Howe's Generational Theory of social change, for example, was a breath of fresh air (and now almost ubiquitous in Christian student ministry literature). Joel Barker's concepts of paradigm shifts and S-curves helped pique the imagination of our denomination's state leaders, ushering in a growing capacity for transformative change and long-range ministry.

The 1990s was also the decade in which theoretical physicists and quantum mechanics began to write for a more popular audience. Philosophies of time, string theory, cosmology, and origins of the universe provided the church with fresh and challenging ways of thinking about God's work in the universe. Concepts involving multiple-, parallel, or stacked-universes honestly engaged time travel, renewing once again my childhood interest. The naturalist J.T. Fraser also provided a very helpful taxonomy of time as well as a title for all those who seriously grapple with the past, present and future: "Temponaut."

### ***The Future Becomes Clear (Lake)***

Recognizing the benefit of futuring and wanting to advance farther in the field, I honored the new millennium by enrolling in the Masters of Science program in Studies of the Future at the University of Houston—Clear Lake. The dean Dr. Peter Bishop was well-known in the field of futures studies, and the Clear Lake approach provided a great blend between the theoretical and the practical. The summer intensive allowed me to work full time while using my continuing education and vacation allotments to complete the program.

I arrived in Clear Lake not really knowing what I had bit off. My Introduction to Futures Studies class was taught by Dr. Wendy Schultz. On the first day of the first class, I was asked to join with two or three other people and imagine that we were engineers. We were then asked to design a new car that relied only on the characteristics of an octopus. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, and then our imaginative juices kicked in. Such exercises were common and consistently filtered through social change theories, qualitative and quantitative analysis, visionary futuring, and other course offerings. I felt that I had finally come home.

As Nancy and I had just been accepted as missionaries with the United Methodist Church and were about to head overseas, I decided to write my Master's thesis on the future of Christian missions.

"Exomissiology" asks the church to recognize that humans now continuously occupy space and plan to inhabit environs such as the moon and Mars. Exomissiology provides a theology and a praxis for allowing the church to be in ministry to both space colonists and to new life forms that may be encountered.

Science fiction writers such as Mary Doria Russell in books such as *The Sparrow* (1996) offer plausible scenarios (and warnings) for the church's off-planet experiences.

### ***Hope for a Land With No Future***

As far as on-planet experiences are concerned, Eurasia was an amazing place to open up my newly-established futures tool box. Along with Nancy and an indigenous leader I served as the Director of Evangelization and Church Development for nine Eurasian countries. Together we studied the nature of the emerging Protestant church in the former Soviet Union, and established strategies for long-term church development for the United Methodist Church. During that time a major sociological survey was conducted, suggesting that as a cohort the Russian populous embraces primarily a short-term view of the future. So how does one practice as a futurist in a land with no future?

We soon discovered that the idea of Christian hope captivated the imagination of the people we served. Formal theologies of hope need to be re-explored and refashioned in light of the promise they hold for a large portion of the world's population. Most interesting, the discipline of futures studies helped inform the formation of theologies of hope. Therefore, a theology of futures studies may need to also strongly engage theologies of hope. To say this in another way, God always comes to us from the future.

### ***The Once and Future Futurist***

Today my futures work has been turned loose on a megachurch in Tulsa, OK. I engage three ministry areas, and have the fortune of being able to use much of my futures skill set within all three. As Minister of Missions, I try to stay engaged with global trends and issues, and often from a grassroots, indigenous level. As the Team Leader for Emerging Worship, I assist a group of creative imagineers in experimental worship for a "postmodern cohort." As primary consultant to our Local Church Health Team, I help a group of dedicated laypersons envision and strategize for the long-range future of our local church. Outside of the local church, I feel privileged to work with a diverse group of futurists (many of whom belong to the Association of Professional Futurists -- [www.profuturists.com](http://www.profuturists.com)) in resourcing organizations such as the American Optometric Association and the Gerson Lehrman Group.

What a pleasure it is to be with you at Foresight 2006 and again in the spring 2007 semester of the Master of Arts in Strategic Foresight program. I look forward to our continuing adventure together as *temponauts*, mutually exploring God's gift of kairos.

### **Related Links**

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