



Essay

Futures with Friends: The Birthing of Change

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Introduction

This is a story of my Futures journey and pays honour to those who, alongside me, dreamed of change and inspired the environment that breathed life into those dreams. The story highlights the benefits of being able to work alongside others on their Futures journey. Friends who can significantly amplify and untangle the process of change that the Futures journey commences and who support one another to uncover and pursue alternative and preferred futures.

Two questions worthy of exploration are:

- What elements offered by Futures with Friends support the Personal Future's process so effectively?
- What elements would support the replication of a collaborative approach such as Futures with Friends?

Around the Table with Friends

When we came together as a study group, each of us brought varying degrees of previous exposure to Futures Thinking with Sohail Inayatullah. This Futures journey began around a dining room table in a Brisbane suburban cottage as we ventured into the "Become a Futurist – Futures 101" coursework with Metafuture and Sohail Inayatullah (Inayatullah, 2020). It developed into a journey that would change the trajectory of my life.

I remember it well; the space was filled with an almost tangible energy that reached out to me and said, "you're safe, you're accepted, regardless, we have your back." I was sitting in a context of support, caring, safety and importantly trust.

Defining Friends

To define 'friends' in the context of this venture, I am considering those with whom I shared the journey as the study group and those behind the course work who were present to support the development of alternative and preferred futures. Hicks (2018) points to how relationships can thrive when people feel they are seen, heard, and valued. What may be said is that all parties being respectful of each other's human worth and innate dignity allowed a different type of strength to flow.

I discovered that there is a different way to be strong. Honouring and respecting each other's innate dignity offered a safe space for vulnerability that led to lasting personal change.

The Notion of Human Worth and Elements of Dignity

Our human worth, our dignity, is our superpower. An inner strength that can sustain us through the toughest of trials and circumstances. We are responsible for holding to our dignity, an internal power that is not reliant on any external forces, authorities, or influences. Our dignity can only be stripped away if we surrender it into the hands of others.

Our human dignity encompasses a number of pivotal elements. All of which in composite define 'dignity.' For clarity, I have listed the aspects as described in the publication "Leading with Dignity" (Hicks, 2018, p.16-17)

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- Acceptance: Open to expressing authentic self without fear of being negatively judged.
- Recognition: Be generous with praise, credit where it's due.
- Acknowledge: Listen attentively, validate, and respond to concerns.
- Inclusion: Let others feel they belong, at all relational levels.
- Safety: Ensure physical and psychological safety without retribution when they speak up.
- Fairness: Treat with equality and justly – even-handed.
- Independence: Empower to act on their own behalf, to give a sense of hope and possibility.
- Understanding: What others think matters; offer opportunity for explanations and perspectives. Actively listen to gain understanding.
- Benefit of Doubt: Trust as if trustworthy.
- Accountability: Take responsibility for own actions; apologise if necessary.
- In this instance, I want to highlight acceptance, acknowledgment, safety and understanding. The triad of friends allowed an open expression of the authentic self without fear of being negatively judged. Each was acknowledged through attentive listening, validating, and responding to concerns. Fearless friends are an amazing support mechanism, if not a necessity.

Friends who are fearless enough to quiz, probe, and ask the hard questions. Questions that provoke the consideration of long-buried origins of behaviours, reactions, thinking and ways of being in the world. Physical and psychological safety opened the door to a vulnerability that flowed like liquid gold. A healing balm that moved around the table.

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) of Self

Pillar 4 - Deepening the Future

After experiencing the power and success of the learnings I had put into practice from Futures 101 with Sohail Inayatullah (2020), I continued with the study support group for the Personal Futures Masterclass (Inayatullah, 2022).

Change is not an easy space to inhabit. For me, Personal Futures came with examining my thinking, actions, and way of being in the world. It was about expanding consciousness and reducing egocentrism. (Inayatullah, 2022). True change requires taking a step back, observing, and being willing to engage with whatever comes to the surface.

Self-reflection: Gaining Clarity

Acknowledging my current position and assigning a metaphor proved to be a painful process. When one is looking at Futures for an organisation, it is disparate. Separated from our personal being, distanced from our personal sense of capability and achievement.

For me, acknowledging that the life I was living was not the life I wanted caused me to feel trapped, deceived, short-sighted and foolish. It is easy to live life one day following another. Deceiving myself that things will get better if only I try harder, better, and different. I stepped back and reflected on behaviours and ways of thinking that no longer served me well. In the past, grit and determination may have saved me, but was it now creating the confinement in which I found myself?

Insight Emerging. Engaging in the CLA process highlighted that I had been on a metaphorical roundabout – same promises – same results – same, same. I had to get off. I was ever hopeful of change but caught in a never changing cycle of dysfunction. I had to recognise that no matter how persistent, how hard I worked or how much hope I invested, it was never going to work for me.

An Instrument of Change. At point of 'metaphor impact' there was a level of anxiety that rose in me. It sat heavy in my chest. Every part of me wanted to scream "how unfair". I wanted to run; I wanted to fight; and I was unsure which one I would hold to first. Assigning a metaphor to my reality brought it into a clarity and perspective as stark as suddenly being exposed in a spotlight. There was no denying what I now saw. This was where the study group stepped into the gap.

Once the impacts of the metaphor hit, I knew there was no alternative but to proactively forge the path I wanted. A path of my choosing, matching my values and goals.

Authentic friends know who you really are; are not afraid to ask difficult questions; and are there for the messiness of the task ahead. Friends supported me through this initial step. I was challenged and tested around choices; I cried; I laughed; and there may have been some internal ‘screaming’ on my part. There was respectful but in-depth interviewing.

Without the Story the Actions Don’t Make Sense

Anna Funda’s character Ruth in *All That I Am* insightfully notes, “Strange isn’t it what adheres to the flypaper mind.” (Funder, 2011). After immersing myself in the CLA of Self (Inayatullah, 2022), it is apparent a good part of who I am is self-constructed by my “flypaper mind”. I had become the product of all that clings to my flypaper mind, what I pay attention to; and what actions are impressed and held in place with accompanying emotions.

Metaphors of the Mind. The flypaper mind plays those impressed stories over and over and helps to create metaphors of the mind that inform how I was living my life; how I was acting and reacting. Perceptions of the past had entwined themselves around who I really am and, like a Strangler Fig Tree that takes over its host tree, became the persona presented to the world.

Perspectives and how we engage within our world become vivid through metaphor. Fischer and Marquardt (2022) note that metaphor is “how we, as humans, make sense of our world...we conceptualize one thing in terms of another”.

Milojević and Inayatullah (2015) posited that the stories we tell ourselves whether derived from deeply held perceptions or metaphorical meanings assigned to our futures “give meaning to our actions in the present”. Exploration using CLA of Self allows us to uncover the “dance between the inner and outer” and “brings story for transformation from background to foreground”. (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015)

The System of Selves: Module 4, Personal Futures Masterclass (Inayatullah, 2022)

My journey into uncovering self during Module 4 in Personal Futures Masterclass was very important to me (Inayatullah, 2022). The issue was clear, but I needed to understand how I got on the metaphorical roundabout and what kept me there. To understand historic and unconscious thought processes, however painful, would give me the power to recognize and respond to similar circumstances in the future. To quote Dr Wayne Dyer “When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change”. (Dyer, 2009, n.p.)

The Pandora’s box itself became a metaphor for opening and uncovering the impacts of System, Worldview, Myths and Metaphors as described in CLA (Inayatullah, Pillar 4: Deepening the Future). My family dealt with issues by hiding them away - get over it; don’t talk about it. To dare vary from that stance would mean being labelled and ostracised as a troublemaker.

The initial shock and realisation that what I thought I had left behind was still impacting on me into the present was shattering. I realised that I had been talking to myself in metaphors from a young age, and those metaphors guided my actions and reactions into my future. After the smoke, shock, and fuss of uncovering long-forgotten pain and old ways of thinking and responding were opened to the air, the healing was able to flow.

Sohail Inayatullah’s analogy of the Iceberg (Inayatullah, 2020 & 2022) for what lies unseen within our ways of being in the world really resonated with me. Around 7/8ths of an iceberg is below the waterline – unseen. The essence of story that helped me to make sense of my actions sat in the depths of understandings contained in Systemic and Worldview and in particular in Myths and Metaphors (see Table 1: Uncovering story and system of selves).

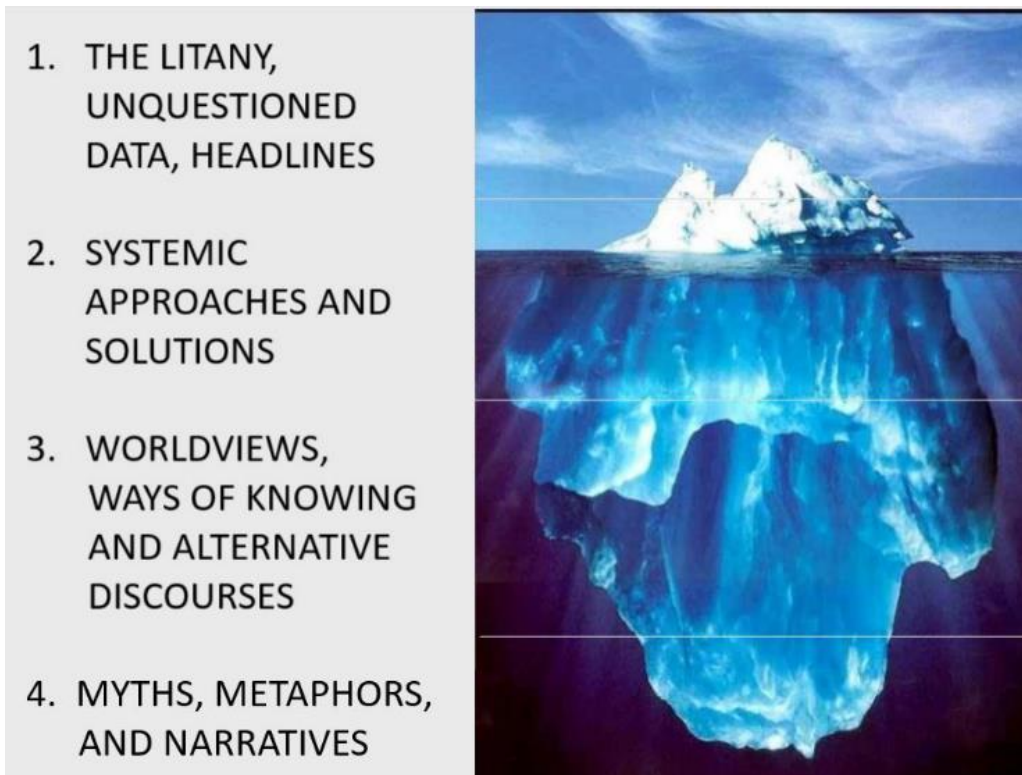


Fig 1: Iceberg Analogy for Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) (Inayatullah, 2020)

Note: Illustration taken from Metafuture School’s Become a Futurist – Futures 101 with Sohail Inayatullah: Pillar 4 Deepening the Future.

Table 1. Uncovering Story and System of Selves - Questioning to Bring Clarity to My Story

Litany	Who I am, what’s my story? How do I present to the world?
System	Multiplicity of selves What things do I say over and over about where I sit within my world? How are my ways of being in the world impacting on my future? What influences my thinking and behaviour on a daily basis?
Worldview	The cognitive lens The unconscious story Disowned selves What do I push away? What are the trigger events that have created an inner worldview?

Myths, Metaphors, and Narratives	Uncovering origins of a life story The unconscious story that drives how I am in the world What are the origins of the issue? What is the story I live from the past? What metaphors have I brought with me from my past?
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CLA: A Journey of Transformation

Table 2, below, reflects the work and goals already achieved.

Table 2. Self-Journey towards Transformation

	Current (at time of initial intervention)	Transformed
Litany	Stop the bus I want to get off!	The exploration begins
System	I'm too old to get off this bus. Retirement is not an option. Where do I go? I should stay on the bus	I can't afford <i>not</i> to get off. I can survive. I can find something else to do. I give myself permission to make mistakes.
Worldview	Independence. I must do things alone It's weak to ask for help Perseverance at all costs The world is not safe. Invisibility=invincibility "It is better for someone to think you're a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt".	An interdependent life has benefits. It's ok to share the messiness of life. Ok to walk away I can trust others. Ok to be vulnerable Others' perspectives don't silence me
Myths, Metaphors, and Narratives	Hurdle Jumper Stuck on Roundabout Cloak of Invisibility	Happy Hiker

Table 3, below, reflects the ongoing work from Table 2. 'Transformed' from Table 2 is now 'Current' in Table 3 and indicates Futures Thinking as an ongoing self-project.

Table 3. Personal CLA

	Current	Transition	Transformed
Litany	The exploration begins	I am in a constant state of flux	I co-create my adventure

	Current	Transition	Transformed
System	I can't afford <i>not</i> to get off. I can survive. I can find something else to do. I give myself permission to make mistakes.	I consider my health and wellbeing paramount. Change is uncomfortable but brings growth Ok to take considered risks I can seek advice from others	I am conscious of self-care and giving myself time for reflection. I walk with others. I flow and grow with change I thrive in my chosen community. I ask for guidance when I need it. I explore risk.
Worldview	An interdependent life has benefits. It's ok to share the messiness of life. Ok to walk away I can trust others. Ok to be vulnerable Others' perspectives don't silence me	There is wisdom in an interdependent life. It's wise to share I am allowed to turn around and walk away Learning to trust others will make life easier. Being open and vulnerable will bring strength I will allow space to be heard	<i>"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."</i> Helen Keller <i>Ubuntu: "I am because you are."</i> I am a visible and valued community member. Wisdom tells me when to stand and when to walk away. I own my story not run from it. Innovation and creativity flow My voice is heard.
Myths, Metaphors, and Narratives	Happy Hiker	Happy Hiker to Community Hiker	Happy Community Hiker

Futures Triangle: Pillar One

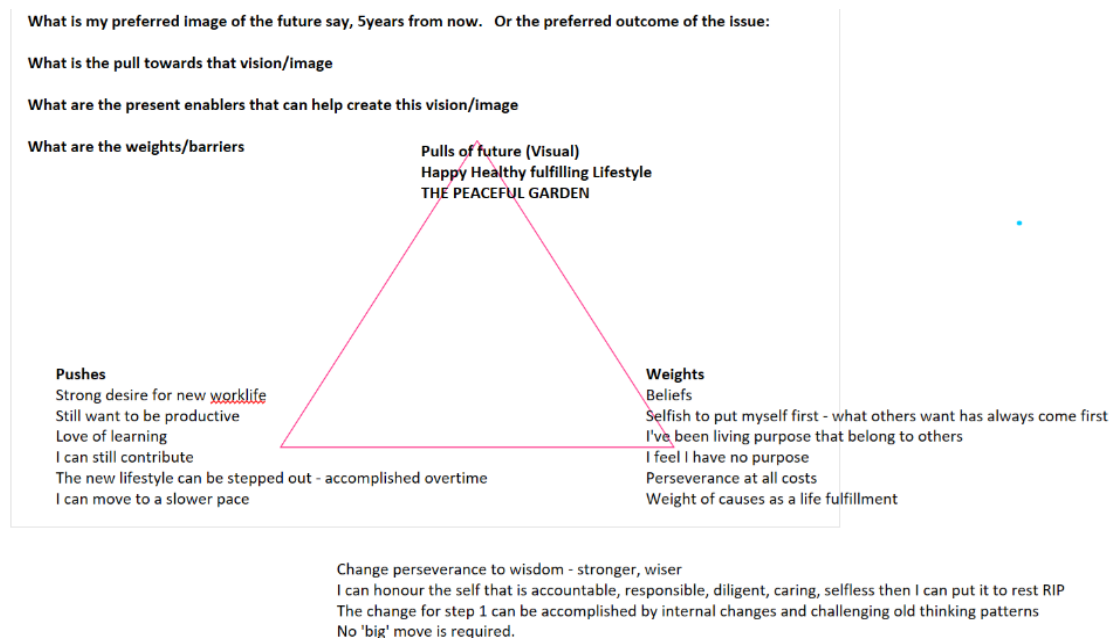


Fig 2: Extract from personal notes during Personal Futures Masterclass, Module 2.

We talked about what was pushing us towards our vision and the present enablers that would help us towards

that vision. I uncovered present desires and exposed long held goals. Goals that could never be accomplished in my present state.

Against identified pulls and pushes, I looked to the weights, what was anchoring me in place and preventing my moving. My work-team relationships held a strong bond along with the purpose I had so vehemently supported that made the work-life feel meaningful. What would change look like? What would the new vision feel like? How well did it fit? Could I see myself living that vision? Is there a new way of looking at the weights? Do I need to look beyond my current enablers?

Assigning a new metaphor: a vision of the future

Gaining Clarity About the Future. I looked to where I wanted to be (preferred and alternate futures) and assigned a metaphor to match my preferred future. I wanted to experience a sense of achievement, a sense of a purpose that is specific to me - not an organisation or a campaign, or even a fight that feels endless. I wanted a purpose that supports my values, my sense of wellbeing, my love of seeing things flourish. I wanted to become the “Happy Hiker”. This was not a complete vision for the preferred future, but it was enough for me to manage the issue I had identified during our conversations.

I played with the new vision of my future, building it like a totem into an image of reality. Talking and laughing about what it would look like; and how I would feel. Around the table on that day, I breathed life into what had been the mere image of reality – my imaginings of what could be possible for me. I saw a glimpse of what was possible, and it was beautiful. I held it like precious metal in gloved hands.

Backcasting

Pillar 6: Transforming the future (Inayatullah, 2020)

Working My Way Back from Metaphor to Reality. When I drew up the story of how I got to my new life I was very specific in my imaginings. This gave me a plan that enabled and spurred me to action. My plan was precise and doable. I followed it one step at a time. Step by step out of the quagmire.

I was purposefully specific in my plans until it looked and felt as if it had already happened. It became my new reality. I was precise, even to the point of who would assist me in achieving my preferred future. I laid down a timeframe and identified parameters aligned with my values. Milojević and Inayatullah (2015) point out that the “narrative foresight process ensures that the story is linked with the strategy and vice versa.”

Aligning my future to my values was more than important; it was imperative for me. This future lived on my whiteboard. I looked at it every day and marked off my progress.

Changing the Path

Anthony Grant, Professor of Coaching Psychology, University of Sydney, is credited with a simple yet profound quote: “Changing one thing can change everything” (Grant, n.d.)

One major thing was changed, and the result is that I now live a very different life. I am in no way saying the journey was easy. Friends supported me during the changes, daily reminding myself of what my life will look like in working toward my preferred future and securely holding to the new metaphor. At times the feeling that I was leaping into an abyss, the unknown, had a mix of fear and excitement. This journey held sadness, joy, surprises, and a sense of accomplishment that only comes with a goal fought and won.

There was something very important in what I had learned together with others. Taking friends with you on a journey that you know could be challenging is like using a trekking pole for a hike on rocky ground. I felt I had uncovered a treasure in what had become Futures with Friends and a shared experience of success.

I have tasted the success that Futures Thinking can bring. The success was personal; like tasting chocolate for the first time, one piece would never be enough.

Conclusion and Reflection

The wording “conclusion” is a misnomer. For in truth, the Personal Futures journey will never have an ending. Inayatullah (2014) says, “The path **is** the goal”.

For me, Futures Thinking, as experienced in the Metafuture courses (Inayatullah, 2020 & 2022), has become a way of being in the world, a way of thinking rather than simply a set of tools I pick up and put down.

I am privileged to share my personal futures learning journey with friends who are very present when pathways are slippery and to celebrate a milestone achievement. Not only those who shared the study experience but also those behind the course work who were present to support the development of alternative and preferred futures

Futures with Friends encapsulates in a microcosm the benefits of humanity practiced in the community. If we consider moss a metaphor for Futures with Friends, we see it mirrors life in miniature. Moss is tougher than it looks, and although it grows in so many challenging environments, it flourishes under healthy, perfect conditions.

It could be asserted that if the “perfect condition” elements (as discussed on page 2, “The notion of human worth and elements of dignity”) are present in a given circumstance, the benefits of Futures with Friends could be replicated.

There were elements of Futures with Friends that were specific to this group, such as a long-built trust and respect, and although our strengths and priority values differed, there was an alignment of the values base with each member. I acknowledge that the mix of personalities, strengths and priority values will differ with each group.

I strongly affirm the necessity of awareness and the presence of elements that support, honour and respect our innate dignity and humanity. There is an intricate dance between moving towards a person in support and stepping back, allowing space for independent thought, decisions, and personal reflection. I acknowledge that I am responsible for my change, and supporting change, which will always be with us, is a sphere of influence set around Futures with Friends.

The benefits of daring to take this path cannot be underrated. During the process, my head was filled with an endless stream of ‘selves’ and metaphors to sort. It was like opening a Pandora’s box filled with feelings of loss and grieving, happiness, and hope. With the support of friends, I broke through this fog which opened me to understandings I could not have previously accepted or contained.

Embarking on the CLA of Self as experienced in the Personal Futures Masterclass (Inayatullah, 2022) is not for the faint-of-heart. It takes courage and support to break down barriers of self-protection built over a lifetime. For those who dare to take that journey, the insight and light of knowledge exposed can be life changing.

Futures with Friends holds an amplification of the process. Accessing various voices, sharing ways of thinking and being in the world opens new paths and understandings. It offers an opportunity to step back and look at others’ perspectives while at the same time adjusting one’s perspectives. The most amazing part of committing to this process was that I also shared others’ joy in birthing new pathways. The birthing pains felt like my pains; the successes felt like my success. George Floyd said, “We need to think of ourselves as guardians of dignity, but not just our own” (Freeman, 2020).

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Endnotes

1 Original essay was submitted as part of the successful completion of “Become a Futurist – Futures 101” with Sohail Inayatullah, and awarded by the Center for Futures Intelligence and Research (CFAR)