



Essay

Beyond the Gaia-Borg Dichotomy: Imagining a Second Chance

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Abstract

Futures Studies acknowledges the power of language, narratives, and meaning-making in shaping our world and futures. Through the lens of Futures Studies, this essay examines the prevailing dichotomy between an ecologically oriented 'Gaia' and a technocratic 'Borg' future within contemporary discourse. It argues that this binary overlooks the pivotal role of human agency in fostering societal transformation and advocates for citizen agency and compassion as fundamental to achieving inclusive and sustainable futures. Incorporating these elements, we propose an alternative future scenario that harmoniously integrates earth-centric dignity with technological advancement, offering a vision beyond the limitations of current popular discourse.

Keywords

Causal Layered Analysis, Compassion, Citizen Agency, Alternative Futures, Narrative Foresight

Setting the context

What societal futures do we want and deserve? This is the overarching question that the 2021-2022 cohort of corporate education executive delegates were asked to grapple with as part of their coursework on Strategic Foresight at the Gordon Institute of Business Science of the University of Pretoria in South Africa. The insights derived from these engagements form the basis of this Essay.

Guided by Inayatullah's Six Pillar Approach to Transformative Change (Inayatullah, 2008), we explore how deeply our dominant societal narratives are imbued with conflict-ridden, individualistic and technocratic metaphors. With the Futures Triangle, we examine the juxtaposition of a living Earth future, a technocratic present and an anthropocentric past (Inayatullah, 2008). Leveraging the insights offered by Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) to "deepen the future" and to create alternative futures scenarios (Inayatullah, 2008, pg. 12), we dissect the inherent limitations within 'Gaia' and 'Borg' futures scenarios dominating societal discourse today. Our dissection reveals a narrative vacuum where citizen agency and compassion should reside.

Building upon this analysis, we apply Narrative Foresight (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015) to articulate an integrated futures scenario that reclaims agency and compassion as central. We trace the ideological shift from the individualistic Western-inspired myth of *I dream therefore I am* to a collective Ubuntu socio-cultural meme, *I am because you are*, as a transformative narrative for the year 2045 and beyond.

Having created new images and memories for this desired future(s), we articulate pathways that may facilitate our evolution to this future(s), offering guidance to scholars, policy-makers, futures practitioners and empowered citizens dedicated to creating inclusive futures built upon the tenets of Ubuntu.

We conclude by advocating for a reinvigorated focus on citizen agency and compassion within the discipline of Futures Studies and more broadly. We argue for their recognition, not just as abstract concepts but as active principles that must guide our decisions and actions if we are to realise the hopeful futures that Earth's second chance represents.

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Futures we deserve

The world is at a crossroads. Once revered as the civilisational goose that lays golden eggs, capitalism is losing its lustre. Every day, society counts the casualties of war, climate catastrophe, and global inequality.

Mapping time

Within this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous context, Inayatullah's (2008) futures triangle is employed to map the forces from three juxtaposed time horizons: the pull of the future reflecting today's image(s) of the desired future; the push of the present demonstrated through change enablers in the form of quantitative drivers and trends; and the weight of the past that serve as barriers to change (Inayatullah, 2023) (Figure 1). Through what Cruz et al. (2023) refer to as an "interplay of hindsight, insight and foresight", different emerging plausible futures are analysed as the last step in the Futures Triangle process (Cruz et al., 2023, p. 156).

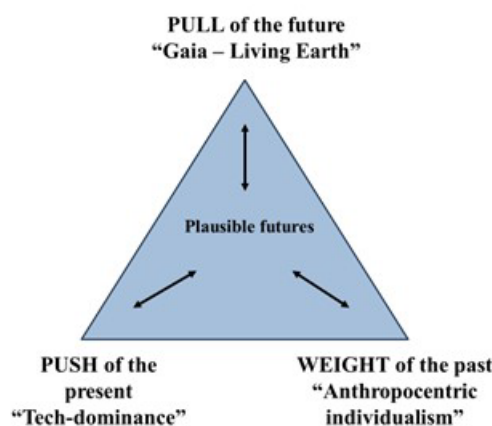


Fig. 1: The Futures Triangle (Inayatullah, 2008, p. 8)

'Gaia – living Earth' represents the pull of the future. It is a vision of the future that emphasises ecological balance, regeneration and the interconnectedness of all living things with the Earth's systems.

The weight of the past is rooted in an anthropocentric individualism that has driven mass consumerism and obsessive emphasis on economic growth since the first industrial revolution. This mindset, focused on shareholder primacy and capital accumulation, has led to resource depletion, geopolitical tensions, and environmental degradation. It is not just a historical legacy, but also a powerful force that continues to influence current policies and practices. This anthropocentric individualism, deeply ingrained in societal institutions and structures, is a significant barrier to adopting more sustainable and regenerative practices.

The push of the present is dominated by technological innovation which prioritises short-term gains and efficiencies. This tech dominance, evidenced by the exponential rise of Artificial Intelligence, is reshaping global economies, workplaces, employment, and social structures, contributing significantly to global warming. As intelligent machines begin to exceed human capabilities across multiple industries, including education, healthcare, manufacturing and creative industries, the line between machines and humans is blurring. Society is forced to reevaluate what defines human value and purpose, prompting a reconsideration of what it means to live a fulfilling life.

As a counter-narrative to the exploitative past and tech-driven present – both ostensibly lacking in concern for natural systems and ecological sustainability – 'Gaia' challenges the view of the Earth as merely a resource to be exploited. Inayatullah's Futures Triangle highlights the tension between these forces, shaping the plausible futures that emerge. This tension raises several questions, similar to what Cruz et al experienced in foresight exercises they conducted (Cruz et al., 2023, p. 159):

1. Is the plausible future really preferred given the weight of the past, the push of the present and the pull of

the future?

2. Could this plausible future merely be a repackaged used future?
3. What disowned futures are we overlooking?
4. What other alternative futures should we consider?

To truly unpack plausible futures and address these questions, we need a different methodology, one that deepens our understanding of the future. CLA is one such methodology.

Language – bridging past, present, and future

"Language reveals the world", says Khatun (2018, p. 244y) in a critique of the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Stories and metaphors act as language bridges between an existing narrative and a future one. They capture the imagination, addressing the fear of an unwelcome future. They allow stakeholders to abandon the certainty and stagnation of the status quo and the familiarity of what Inayatullah (2015) refers to as used futures, i.e., practices that no longer serve and are essentially dead on arrival. They open up the possibility for alternative futures that are worth working towards (Inayatullah, 2004) so that we do not "revel in our fears" but rather "reveal our dreams," as William Becker suggests (Costanza & Kubiszewski, 2014, p. 16). Fear might sell, but only hope delivers.

While language gives the future a face, a name, and an address where new memories can be created, CLA helps us make sense of the world and its plausible futures. CLA emphasises a vertical exploration of causal layers of a particular point in time over one concerned more with the horizontal organisation of time. We delve into all four of its layers, from the litany of our expressed concerns and measurable data to the systemic structures that underpin them, the worldviews subconsciously shaping our collective psyche and the myths and metaphors that unconsciously guide our thoughts (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). Based on these "constitutive discourses", CLA deepens the future, facilitating the formation of alternative future scenarios (Inayatullah, 2004, p. 8).

Narrative foresight – reclaiming disowned futures

To articulate these "constitutive discourses" (Inayatullah, 2004, p. 8), Narrative Foresight is used "to make these deeper layers of reality even more explicit and usable" (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015, p. 157). According to them, Narrative Foresight is "about discovering and creating new stories that better meet needs and desires" (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015, p. 152). Inayatullah argues further that, "the task (of a futurist) is to understand the deep underlying narrative. Once that is found, then a new more appropriate story can be created that allows for the information to be recognisable" (Inayatullah, 2018, p. 18). More importantly, as Donella Meadows reminds us, "(t)he more a vision is shared, the more responsible it gets, and also the more ethical" (Costanza & Kubiszewski, 2014, p. 12).

The Integrated Scenario – in search of an inclusive future

The preferred future is not required to be perfect. Rather, any ideal of the future that moves us from imagination to reality must be inclusive. This requires an integration of a future that might be considered the ideal with one that most stakeholders would want to own. To identify these stakeholders, Inayatullah (2015a, p. 358) suggests asking, "Who is not in the room?" Here, Inayatullah's integrated scenario method is employed to imagine an integrated future that accounts for "disowned futures" and actively seeks to integrate them (Inayatullah, 2008, p. 5). Four dimensions emerge: "the preferred – the world we want; the disowned - the world that we reject or are unable to deal with; the integrated – where owned and disowned are united in a complex fashion. And last is the outlier - the future outside of these categories", which may also contain elements to integrate and harness (Inayatullah, 2008, p. 17).

With this approach, we begin articulating the preferred future inspired by Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine, who emphasised the interconnectedness of all entities in a dynamic equilibrium that does not favour individual species but cherishes the relationships among them (Weyler, 2019). This perspective, reminiscent of the 'Living Earth' or 'Gaia' metaphor introduced by Lovelock, reimagines Earth not as a mere place in a universe of places but as a unified, living organism (Weyler, 2019). Frances Moore Lappé reminds us this insight also applies to human

relationships, demanding that we apply ecosystemic instead of egosystemic thinking. He argues that “how we impact the natural world is today almost entirely mediated through social ecology — through our political and economic rules and norms determining, or at least greatly shaping, our personal options and our impact” (Costanza & Kubiszewski, 2014, p. 24). Contrastingly, the outlier scenario, termed 'The Borg', taking its cues from the iconic Star Trek series, envisions a world dominated by cybernetic organisms called borgs. These cyborgs are on a relentless quest to assimilate any and all technological and intellectual assets into their single collective consciousness. In pursuing perfection, 'resistance is futile', they claim. After all, why would anyone reject perfection? (Borg, 2023).

Notably, in both the use of 'Gaia' and 'Borg' in contemporary discourse, collectivism is seemingly celebrated, but citizen agency is neglected. In the case of 'Gaia', it is organically diminished, and in the case of the 'Borg', it is intentionally suppressed. The lost freedom of citizen agency symbolises the disowned future of the human species. Not everyone appreciates the 'Gaia' balance or wants 'Borg' perfection. An alternative future is needed, one that integrates a living Earth and tech-enabled future with one of active and compassionate citizenry.

Beyond integrating preferred and outlier futures, this integrated future importantly should challenge the 'Business is Usual' future with its pervasive worldview of a winner-takes-all world constantly at war, fed on a steady diet of fear, distrust, and hostility. This worldview has infiltrated all societal spaces, turning them into battlegrounds. From classroom to boardroom, every engagement has become a battle to be won. War is so entrenched in our language and psyche. The war we wage against each other has spilled over into a war we also wage against the environment and other sentient beings, disowning all our futures. The future itself is being disowned.

'I dream, therefore I am' becomes 'I am because you are'

Exploring CLA's fourth and deepest myth/metaphor layer, the myth of *I dream, therefore I am* becomes *I am because you are*. This new socio-cultural meme transitions humanity from the ideology of Western individualism to the connected spirit of Ubuntu. The term Ubuntu represents an African philosophy and value system described by the Nguni proverb "ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" and translated as "a person is a person through other persons" (Mutsonziwa, 2020, p. 29). According to Mutsonziwa's doctoral research that sought to develop the first psychometric scale to measure African humanism, Ubuntu goes beyond the collectivism of a 'Gaia' or 'Borg' future. She concludes that there are three primary dimensions underpinning Ubuntu. These are humanness ("being aware of self and other people"), interconnectedness ("all people are bound together by virtue of their shared humanity") and compassion ("other people should be treated with concern") (Mutsonziwa, 2020, p. 16).

Cautious of swapping one container for another, the notion of 'becoming' suggests a continuous evolution beyond mere philosophical shifts, echoing Inayatullah's idea that "while we need a vision, we do not need a blueprint" (Inayatullah, 2008, p. 11). Beyond transition, this 'becoming' is a reframing towards a new social order, a 'Second Enlightenment', transforming our "socio-cultural context" (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015, p. 153). It asks humans to express beyond self-actualisation "the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos," as was the appeal from psychologist, Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1971, p. 269).

This integrated transformative future is not an absolute rejection of individualism or a wholesale embrace of collectivism. Rather, it is an appeal to continually decolonise the future. It offers a renewed appreciation of citizen agency and a redefinition of humanism (humanness, interconnectedness and compassion) and challenges Western perspectives that have historically dominated and continue to linger in global discourse. It creates spaces and offers dignity to diverse voices and perspectives, iteratively inviting different ways of knowing and thinking about the world and being in the world.

Creating new memories of the future

A visualisation of this transformative narrative helps bring the future into sharp focus and allows for "building new memories" of what is to come (Inayatullah, 2008, p. 12). To this end, all four layers of CLA are utilised (Table 1). Building on the transition from individualism to Ubuntu, we compare and contrast a cultured bonsai tree signifying

individualism with an organic forest that signifies the collective. We recognise that if we want our vision to become reality, we must also change what we measure. Continuing to measure transactional capital through Gross Domestic Product (GDP) only gives added stickiness to 'Business is Usual'. Instead, we offer a new measurement of prosperity: a Shared Thrive Index (STI), which measures socio-ecological relational capital.

Table 1: Causal Layered Analysis contrasting 'I am because I dream' with 'I am because you are'

	2023 – I am because I dream' – A business is usual future	2045 – 'I am because you are' – an integrated transformative future
Litany	GDP measuring transactional capital	STI measures socio-ecological relational capital
System	Technology dictates Hierarchies institutionalise ranks Systems of extraction Structures that bias status, privilege and power	Technology enables Ecosystems enable links Systems of regeneration Structures that embrace dignity, interconnectedness and compassion
Worldview	Nationalism/Fundamentalism Individualistic Winner Takes All The world at war Scarcity Size matters Shareholder capitalism Earth is a resource for life Humans are apart from Nature Privilege rules Independence	Pluralism Everyone counts, everyone is counted The world in harmony Abundance Soul matters Earth is our only shareholder Earth is the source of life Humans are a part of Nature Dignity honours Interdependence
Myth/Metaphor	'I am because I dream' The Hero's Journey The Cultured Bonsai	'I am because you are' The Community's Journey The Organic Forest

Finally, the future is connected with the present by elucidating which pathways and actions could lead to attaining the integrated future scenario. This involves backcasting (Boulding & Boulding, 1995), described by Inayatullah (2008) as "go(ing) from the future to the past and ask(ing) what needs to be done to create the desired future. This helps link vision to actionable steps" (Nikolić, 2022, p. 1). After all, Futures Studies, CLA, and Narrative Foresight are only helpful if they inspire and incentivise different choices and actions today. To quote Donella Meadows: "The future can't be predicted, but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being" (Meadows, 2001, p. 1).

The story of Earth's second chance, realising this integrated transformative future follows here.

The dawn of the first Earth Coalition

It is 2045, one hundred years since World War II ended, marking one hundred years since the world counted the multiple casualties of war for the second time. We may finally have learned that we are not on this planet to compete against one another but rather that we are all connected. It may finally be clear that the cost of carbon is infinitely more expensive than the cost of capital. Mother Earth is not a resource for life but the source of life. The first Earth Coalition, ironically formed in 2039, has been a resounding success. Its mandate is compassion. Dignity, the cornerstone of this compassion, has become a universal, inalienable right of every life form. The GDP, by which the world measured not just economic value but also human value, is replaced by the STI. This new global index integrates a broad spectrum of factors that contribute to society's overall well-being and sustainability. Environmental sustainability and regeneration, social equity, the well-being of all sentient beings, and cultural enrichment are now included as measures of prosperity. People, communities, and ecosystems can thrive together.

Given human history, no one could have imagined that we could solve more with compassion, collaboration, and

welfare than with conflict, competition, and warfare. But we did. However, the journey to this point was challenging. It required policy shifts, paradigm shifts, and mindset shifts. Most importantly, it required courageous conversations and collective and coordinated action. It required citizen agency, as outlined in Figure 2.

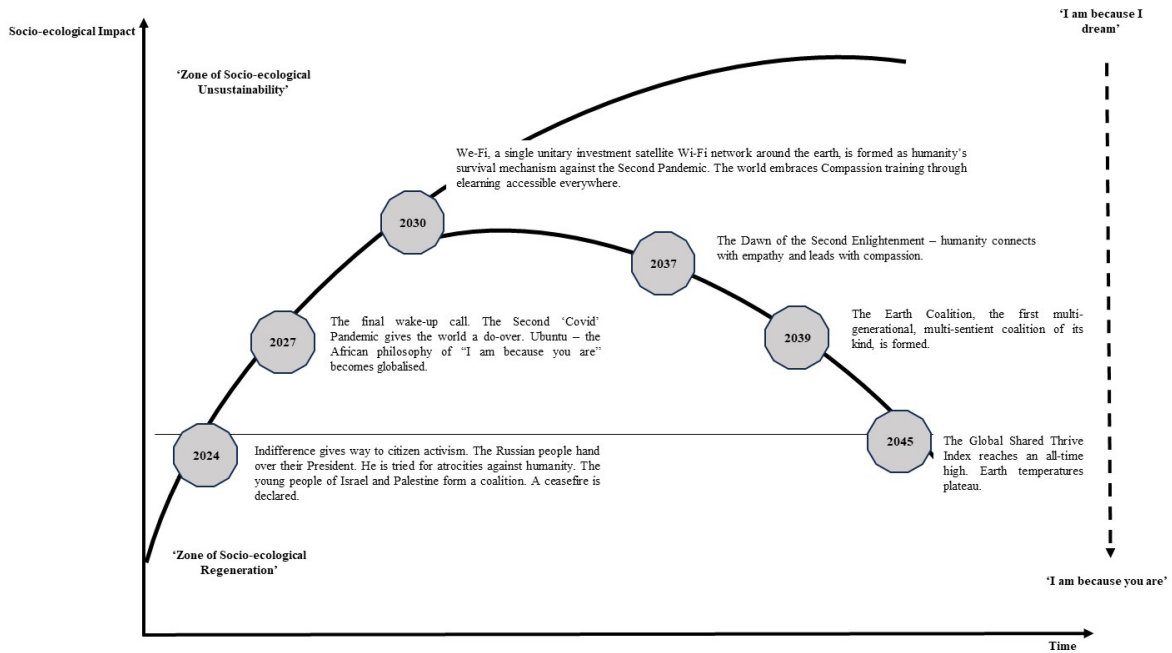


Fig. 2: Backcast – from 2045 to today (adapted from Inayatullah, 2008, p. 19)

The story of the Second Enlightenment

After four Industrial revolutions, the world was ready for a paradigm shift. While we did not know it then, the signs were there all along that change was afoot. While these signs were individually weak signals, collectively, they were what Graham Molitor termed the emerging issues that signalled seeds of possible change, shifting us away from industrial revolution thinking towards a second enlightenment (Inayatullah, 2020).

In 2020, the world experienced COVID-19. It was the first major battle in the war against capitalism and the worshipping of money and power. "Protect the frontline, not the bottom line" was the appeal of the masses. Trust levels across the world increased for a brief period as humanity united against a common enemy. Nevertheless, we lost this battle. Success was short-lived. Greed and indifference proved why they were such longstanding bedfellows. The trust gained was destroyed by practices of vaccine hoarding and nationalism that further exacerbated inequality. The gap between rich and poor widened further. The world was at war with itself again. Sometimes silent, but always violent. This worldview had infiltrated all societal spaces, turning them into battlegrounds. From classroom to boardroom, every engagement had become a battle to be won. War was so entrenched in our language and psyche that we failed to recognise that the war we waged against each other had spilled over into a war we also waged against the environment, other creatures and our collective futures, even though climate disasters were staring us in the face. We were losing the war on Life. Earth's existential threat was, in fact, human.

In 2022, the war between Russia and Ukraine sealed the fate of capitalism, greed, and opulence. Or so we thought. With the Russia-Ukraine war still raging, Israeli-Palestinian conflicts also escalated again after years of ceasefire. The Gaza Strip turned into a place where children became memories. United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called it "the graveyard for children" (Wintour, 2023). This was the wake-up call. Citizens decided to act. It took one small but significant act from the most unexpected corner of the world, South Africa. The world listened.

In 2024, tired of fighting family and friends separated only by a line on a map, the people of Russia handed their president Vladimir Putin over to the UN General Assembly and the Security Council's International Court of Justice. Despite media censorship, TikTok went viral with Russian protests. Slogans of "what unites us is stronger than the borders that separate us" were heard the world over. President Putin is tried for atrocities against humanity. Indifference gave way to activism. The veil on our shared humanity lifted. "The people of Israel and Palestine deserve better leaders. The world deserves better leaders" became the tagline of the time. Emboldened, a small group of young Israelis and Palestinians attempted to find common ground. Israeli and Palestinian leaders, deprived of the oxygen of viral hate so vital for warmongery's success, declared a ceasefire. The world counted its casualties.

In 2027, the Second Health Pandemic gave the world a "COVID do-over". This time, we learned our lessons. The World Health Organization (WHO) has teeth. The World Trade Organization (WTO) supports the equitable distribution of vaccines. It took another three years, but the world not only recovered, it reset. Those who had adopted and retained hybrid work after 2020 COVID-19 thrived because they learned the power of agency. No longer were we celebrating the independence that comes with individual autonomy. Rather, we celebrated the interdependence that comes with collective agency. No longer did we see humanity as ranked; rather, as linked. No longer were we allowing our futures to be disowned of time with friends and family, caring for well-being, travel, learning and development ignored, delayed, or devalued in the interest of a work-dominated present. This marked the globalisation of what Africans have for centuries known as Ubuntu – "I am because you are". A new meme was born. #Individualism became #Ubuntu. The rest of the world understood the business case and followed suit.

2030 was the year when We-Fi, a satellite Wi-Fi network around the Earth, was formed as humanity's survival mechanism against the Second Pandemic. It achieved a previously impossible feat of connecting every single human free of charge, opening the gateway for the free flow of information and knowledge. This was the most significant unitary investment the world has ever seen. Every nation contributed according to its ability. Smartphones were gifted as part of the global vaccination campaign. Everyone was counted, and everyone counted. Our existence depended on it. Some of the information generated was for surveillance and was abused, but for the most part, this same information super network empowered communities and powered humanity.

Together with Web5 and on the back of remote and hybrid work, collective agency muscle was strengthened. Communities with agency sprouted forth new economic models based on circular, regenerative, and net-positive practices, abandoning status quo extractive economic models that dominated at the time. Knowledge exchange was prioritised. Virtual learning was made possible with social and collaborative learning enabled through virtual and augmented reality. The metaverse revolutionised education and learning. Climate change and the environment became a global focus. With everyone and everything connected, the cloud was able to unlock the crowd with crowd-based innovation, funding, and philanthropy. While We-Fi was the most impactful technological change, this was dwarfed by the impact of the social technology packaged as 'Compassion Counts'. As the second major global unitary investment, training in compassion was incorporated into all teaching curricula from classroom to boardroom, church to synagogue. The detractors argued that compassion has always been and should remain the remit of religion. Thankfully, no one listened. We-Fi and advances in artificial intelligence and large language models allowed for the accelerated roll-out to all corners of the globe. Compassion was liberated and democratised.

In 2035, we knew change had come to stay. Seventy percent of political power was in the hands of females and previously marginalised persons. Even the corporate world was more diverse. More Nobel prizes were awarded for practices of care and compassion than purely economic impact. But the real turning point came when it became clear that economic power was no longer white and male.

In 2037, victory was in sight. We aptly named it the Second Enlightenment. A new way of living found favour. We connected with empathy and led with compassion. A problem anywhere was a problem everywhere, and with We-Fi, a solution anywhere fast became a solution everywhere. The world now values and appreciates ways of knowing that we previously ignored from people whose voices were previously silenced. Economic policy changed. The academic focus changed. The research focus changed. The quality of daily conversations changed. Our measures of prosperity changed. The STI is the norm.

In 2039, the Earth Coalition, the first multi-generational, multi-sentient coalition of its kind, was formed. There was even a panel representing generations yet to be born. Its logo became the forest. Every national flag carried this logo as a visible reminder that "what unites us is stronger than the borders that separate us". Its symbolism was

profound. Everyone recognised that 'Organic Forest' represents a thriving ecosystem, deeply rooted and linked by a symbiotic mycorrhizal network of fungi and trees where the entire forest is linked across multiple species. There is as much dignity in being a humble fungus as in being a majestic tree. The forest is alive. This is in sharp contrast to 2023 when the world operated largely based on the 'Cultured Bonsai' – roots severed, individually cultivated, kept small, nurtured on a special diet, trimmed, and pruned with strict artificially created criteria for beauty. The bonsai lived, but it was not alive. It required constant life support.

In 2045, we turned the corner. Earth is on the mend. Mother Nature rewards us for the first time with a plateau in global temperatures. This war is won. In fact, the word 'war' no longer features in the human language or the human psyche. Instead 'Compassion Counts'. The Global STI reaches an all-time high. The world has entered its second enlightenment cycle. Long may it last.

Conclusion

Earth's second chance narrative does not lay claim to the future. Instead, it aims to showcase the power of Futures Studies to unlock diverse and vibrant futures. Our choices, actions, and imaginations can shape an ever-evolving story where many worlds co-exist. More importantly, this narrative symbolises more than just a hypothetical journey towards a future scenario. It also serves as a metaphor for a second enlightenment – a clarion call to leverage our collective citizen agency and compassion to create inclusive and hopeful futures.

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