

Surfing Dator's Tsunamis of Change: Confessions of a Part-time Futurist

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Introduction to Dator

One of the founders of the field of future studies has strongly influenced the second half of my life. For more than 30 years, this individual has had a singular influence in my research interests and career. Jim Dator has been my teacher, mentor, and friend and a guiding light in studies of the future, even though my professional career has been in higher education. Professionally, my primary role has been as a professor of political science, future studies, and more recently faculty in a graduate school of public policy and administration. I will always be at least a part-time futurist, thanks to Dator. He helped me engage with the future and realize that I had to always be a student of alternative futures. He impressed upon me that the future matters, that futures matter. That is what drew me to him at first, and then, over three decades to become my teacher, and eventually, my friend. We are all about our stories (King, 2012) and this is my story, spanning half of my life, about my relationship with a man and his provocative and compelling ideas. Dator taught me we are all about our futures.

Dator has been a secular prophet, although that is neither his persona, nor a professional aspect, but deep down, he is a visionary of biblical proportions. I am inclined towards hyperbole from being witness to innumerable classes, seminars, conferences, public speaking events, and countless personal conversations both face-to-face and virtual. He has been a man with a mission, to promote futures pedagogy, androgogy, literacy, and fluency (Dator, 1991, 1993, 1995; Schultz, 1995). As many prophets do, he has had disciples, detractors, and hangers on, but unlike ecclesiastical prophets he has disdained adulation, worship, and continues to be "a man of the people." Unlike many others in the future studies/foresight profession, he has always advocated direct democracy, participatory futures, a futures studies populism to inform and empower the most lowly. That sense of inclusion, and an expectation that we are all responsible for our own futures, was clearly what attracted me to him and the University of Hawaii at Manoa futures program.

Dator quickly dispelled his laid-back image with his no-nonsense attitude toward a subject that runs like a river through our lives and our relationship. The course was nothing like the mass media course at decade before in high school, it was not about the media, it was a media literacy course. We learned how to construct storyboards, give an effective overhead presentation, how to produce a basic multi-image slideshow, produce an audio narration mixed with music, and basic video techniques and editing (on ancient Betamax

machines. For 1980, it was heady stuff.

My path to Dator and future studies had certain logic to it. Born downwind of the C&H (California and Hawaii) sugar refinery in the San Francisco Bay Area, the family uprooted to Latin America for a stint with the Disciples of Christ Mission Society, and I ended up at the middle of my second decade in Southern California where I finished high school. When we arrived home in the States I saw things differently—a common mental shift for a third culture kid (Pollock & Reken, 2001). Third culture kids are never fully a part of their mother culture, nor a part of those they -- many remain ex-patriots, either by moving overseas again, or inhabiting that space in their inner world. After a four-year stint in the U.S. Navy, with the G.I. Bill in hand, I followed a friend to Hawaii.

Dator managed to blow my mind multiple times during the course, introduced me to the concept of visual puns, which have continued to tickle my mind over the years (even though the idea was initially elusive). Media literacy was also a bridge to studies of the future, and we discussed McLuhan and explored the ways that we shape our tools, after which they shape us (Dator, 1993, para. 3). Dator had started a Masters program in Alternative Futures in the political science department, where I already felt at home, and so by the end of the term I decided to stay on and work under him on my Masters.

Teacher and coach

The Alternative Futures Program must be understood contextually as a program embedded within the Political Science Department at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (Jones, 1992b), which is to say, that it is very much a creature of the department. There was a strong thread of critical theory, a post-structuralist camp, and feminist theory. The department even advertised itself in the late 1980s as being “the most democratic political science department,” which was a radical standpoint that laid the department open to some serious political and cultural bloodletting as the student body took to heart what they were being taught. Graduate students precipitated a series of discussions and retreats in the late 1980s that challenged the faculty to practice what they preached. The rebellion led to a truce between faculty and students that eventually dissipated into history.

A requirement of the Masters program was an internship. Having two years of exposure as an undergraduate to the department, and then a year of coursework, I opted to start an internship midway through the program, to the Institute for Alternative Futures (IAF), in the Washington DC with daughter Erika. As a single parent, I occasionally took her to class with me, and Dator never made an issue of it. In fact, Jim was more than tolerant, he was graceful and friendly to her, and supportive of my interest in radical feminism. Jim has been pro-woman, being raised by women, and was a big proponent of gender neutrality, and uses the generic pronoun *her* in lieu of *him*. I learned from him early on that gender is a spectrum rather than a dichotomy, at various levels of analysis: the genetic, anatomical, emotional, and social; women would have a disproportionate (but positive) impact on all our futures (Dator, 1992).

One of my first tasks was to organize and weed out duplicates of materials and periodicals in the IAF library, an extensive collection that was overflowing out of a walk-in closet. It was a glimpse for me of the state-of-the-art in futures research, primarily on the future of pharmaceuticals and healthcare, but a treasure

trove of materials from around the country and around the world. Dator's work was represented, along with a clear genealogy of the roots of the alternative futures perspective. SRI International had also developed similar approaches to categorize possible, alternative futures (Kinderman, 1985).

What emerged from that over the next two decades back in Hawaii became the Manoa School toolkit, a synthesis of techniques to peel back the layers of meaning in possible alternative futures, both preferred and feared. Dator along with a number of his students over the years have given us back-casting (future histories), in-casting, and scenario building techniques to build alternative futures (Curry & Schultz, 2009). Even in the early years of the Manoa futures program, there was considerable creativity and imagination driven by this emerging cluster of activities around anticipatory democracy. Both IAF's Bezold and Dator were active in highlighting and promoting community, city, and regional futures efforts and supporting organizational futures capacity building programs, such as Hawaii 2000 (Dator, Hamnett, Nordberg, & Pintz, 1999).

In any case, one other internship task I had was to help construct and produce a workshop handbook for one of IAF's congressional workshops on pharmaceutical futures. One of the exercises was an incasting exercise, where participants were asked to imagine aspects of society and the pharmaceutical industry from a four futures perspective. Dator came to an IAF Board meeting during my internship. When he arrived for our meetings, he beamed at me and hugged me like a long-lost son. A paternal character emerged in our relationship that continued for the next decade.

Space cowboys

Dator always had a passion for outer space and cultivated that interest in many of his students. The Media Lab was a busy hub in the early days for his student's projects and activities, adorned with artwork depicting Gerard O'Neil's orbital space habitats and other fanciful images of the future. We met many luminaries in the field of human adaptation to space and planetary scientists in the Planetary Geosciences Department—some of the leading experts in the world. It was a heady time with the moon exploration behind us, and an uncertain but exciting universe of possibilities. Dator actively supported my thesis on the alternative futures of space development, completed in 1983.

In that vein, he encouraged all of his students to get involved in the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) which he deemed more relevant than the predominantly North American World Future Society (which has become more international and representative today). I attended my first WFSF World Conference, the Future of Politics, in Stockholm, Sweden, June 1982. Other students and I helped Dator plan and hold Hawaii in the Global Futures, a regional conference hosted by the university in March 1983. University support for the conference was largely to demonstrate institutional backing for Dator's election bid to be Secretary General of the Federation. The two events were opportunities to meet some of the founders of the field for the first time. The former included sleeping two nights in a sleeping bag on his hotel room floor. The first few years in the WFSF were, in hindsight, golden opportunities to meet many of the luminaries and the international futures field. Dator was obviously liked, as well as well-respected, by his futures colleagues, and it seemed that his students received great courtesy and special encouragement from

many of his friends.

I learned much from Dator in those early years, exposed to his passion for the future and teaching, his open-mindedness, and thirst for knowledge. It was hard not to admire his relationships with his colleagues, both near and far. Most of the faculty in the political science department “did not get” future studies, but they gave Dator grudging respect, and during my years in the department, he took on the role of diplomat, negotiator, confidante, and conciliator for the faculty and leadership. Among the faculty, there was little doubt in my mind that he was the most open to outrageous ideas, and yet he demonstrated a strong sense of skepticism as well. He never appeared to be judgmental, but did not shy away from making his own position clear. He put up with my interest in and research on spirituality, but made very direct in sharing his story, his skepticism about religion and higher beings. In his public persona there was no obvious aversion to those topics, he just did not intentionally “go there.” If anything, his religion was the power of technological innovation, particularly media, and its revolutionary impact on human society.

Dator was a wonderful teacher, he was off-the-wall, inspiring, and passionate about learning what we could about the future and how to imagine and create better, preferred futures for ourselves, our communities, and for humanity. By the end of my Masters, I embraced the idea that our futures are plural, and that there is not a single future, except in the minds of those who are attempting to sell us futures of their own design. Our futures are not preordained, determined by some higher power, or determined by fate—we are also responsible for making the future happen, whether positive, negative, or neutral in its outcome. Alternative futures found fellow travelers with those who were propounding multi-verses, or other variations of the Many Universes Theory coming out of theoretical quantum physics (Dator, 2006). It was transformational to be in Hawaii at that time embedded in a culture of critical theory that was strong within many of the social sciences and humanities at UH. Hawaii was a living example of how alternative images of the future coalesced and clashed, informed by a neocolonial tropical polity, a generally diverse and liberal Hawaii political culture, and wave after wave of immigrants from Polynesia, Europe, North America, Japan, China, Southeast Asia, and Oceania.

Mentor and colleague

1984 was a busy year for the Manoa futures program, as Dator became Secretary-General of the Federation. It coincided with the expansion of his physical space, which included research and office space for the WFSF and the Hawaii Research Center for Future Studies (HRCFS). Dator also became involved with the Pacific International Center for High Technology Research (PICHTR) when it was launched in 1983, and I was among the first researchers hired. We worked together on a literature review of technology innovation for the director and began working on grant proposals. The Center caught the eye of GTE labs, and we quickly put together a grant proposal to explore telecommunications futures in six Pacific Island countries. The two-year grant funded research development and planning that eventually took me and anthropology graduate student Barbara Moir on a series of trips to six Pacific Island polities, twice over two years, to interview telecommunications experts and workers (Dator, Jones, & Moir, 1987). He opted not to be involved in the research fieldwork, but was otherwise a very active Principle Investigator for the project.

He treated me as a junior colleague throughout my remaining years at the university. (That may have not been entirely to my professional advantage, having found ample distractions from my own research and writing.) We not only spent three years involved in PICHTR projects, but also planned and organized WFSF events and HRCFS projects. During those years, Dator organized a major world conference for the Federation, we co-hosted another world conference in San Jose, Costa Rica (I served as his assistant for the conference), and he led Spring break futures courses in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. I often got more quality time with him on the road than in Honolulu.

Mike Hamnett arrived at the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) and we began a collaboration called the Center for Development Studies, next door to the HRCFS office, and along with Wendy Schultz, took our futures perspective into the Pacific Basin. The first major project, with both Dator and Hamnett, was a project funded by the US Department of the Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to help the Republic of the Marshall Islands plan for global climate change and sea level rise. We subsequently worked in the Northern Marianas, Guam, and American Samoa on a series of coastal zone management projects and conferences, and a number of projects in Hawaii focused on coastal zone management, global climate change, and sea level rise (Jones, 1990, 1991, 1992a).

During the last half of the decade, I also pursued research exploring the work of James Lovelock and the Gaia theory (Lovelock, 1979, 1988). In my internship at IAF, one project we did for the US Geological Survey (USGS) focused on identifying emerging issues in water resources. I had found the project frustrating, because the USGS explicitly ruled out any water issues that might be identified involving international borders or boundaries. It seemed to me, never mind the policy mandate, that many of the emerging issues were trans-border issues, such as acid precipitation coming from Canada, and that they should not be ignored. I set that aside, but stumbled onto an article about Lovelock and the Gaia hypothesis. Three years later, after completing my Masters thesis, I began to explore dissertation topics, and the Gaia hypothesis appealed to me as an emerging trend. Furthermore, from its emerging issues beginning, the Gaia concept had taken on a life of its own, primarily within the New Age and environmental community. The Gaia hypothesis had become a popular culture trend, both compelling to some and controversial to others (including Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould). At the very end of the decade, I had no more excuses for lingering, and finished my dissertation work.

Friend and supporter

In the first few years of full-time teaching, I was able to stay in touch by e-mail, finally a dependable and routine form of communication. However, I did not reflect deeply about our relationship until I was applying for promotion and tenure seven years later. He was still my mentor, but that mentoring aspect of the relationship had long since shifted into an internal voice. Particularly in my teaching and public speaking—even today—I ask myself, “What would Jim Dator do?” His particular brand of self-deprecating irony and humor is not my inherent style, but it is a useful approach to reaching an audience, when Dator-like moments present themselves. I have tried to model his office conversation style, characterized by giving the student (or faculty, for that matter) his active listening, undivided attention, but once your time is up, papers begin to shuffle. That was not always too subtle, but it was

effective and that sometimes works for my own good effect.

Dator never boasts about all the traveling he does (a true globe trotter), which is something I have also tried to model. It is even hard sometimes to pry out of him where he is going, and where he has been, although ironically, he will often confide in e-mail that he is in some exotic location for the International Space University, or futures studies gig.

At an adolescent stage of academic development, there were growing pains. Even in the early years, my cohort burned Dator in effigy during one of our Friends of the Futures, monthly graduate student meetings. It was to celebrate our own intellectual independence. We did not always see eye-to-eye. He had a low tolerance for indulgence in religious and spiritual speculation, and was not big on attending department parties (he rarely attended) or even program gatherings (which he attended grudgingly). For a public person, he had a more sheltered personal life. I never saw these as shortcomings, but rather as differences in and between our values and interests. Some students found it frustrating that he was not much of a science fiction fan, nor interested in first-run Hollywood movies (which he asserted he would eventually see on one of his routine airplane flights).

Dator has continued to be a role model for his students, and while there have been some accusations that he has produced an army of clones, the truth is that he has had a huge impact on the thinking and worldview of scads of his students. I do not think that there are really “Datorites” in the sense of a cult of personality, but he has generated a cult of alternative futures thinking. It is his indefatigable passion for future studies, his sense of the absurd and belief that trash is beautiful, that any useful statement about the future appears ridiculous, and that we have a role in shaping our futures is what moves others.

My mentor and friend is not just a voice in my head, but someone who has continued to be supportive of my teaching and research. After going off on my own to the Mainland, he continued to write letters of recommendation, supported me in my bid for office as Secretary-General of the WFSF in 2001, and participated in a futures project that I helped organize in eastern Oregon. He gave me great advice on a number of occasions during my tenure as Secretary General, particularly his repeated recommendation to be, first-and-foremost, a diligent correspondent. To this day, he still models that behavior and reminds me, and hopefully others, that vision and inspiration are keys to creating a better future.

My career in higher education as a part-time futurist is a direct result of one man’s influence on my life. His example and training continue to be a central part of how I see my own role as an educator. His dedication to the field and to educating and engaging everyone to create and realize their own futures continues to inspire my own life and work. The future may have a long fuse, but it’s getting shorter.

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