School of Leadership STUDIES
REGENT UNIVERSITY

The Making of a Futurist

A Personal Essay

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Foresight International, Richmond, Victoria, Australia

From September 23-25, 2004, the School of Leadership Studies hosted Dr. Richard Slaughter on campus at Regent University, for the second annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay 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 the both the U.S. and around the world.

Richard Slaughter
Dr. Richard Slaughter is a futurist of international standing with a PhD in Futures Studies. He is the author and/or editor of 16 books and has written numerous articles and papers on futures themes and methodologies. He has long-standing professional links with prominent international institutions, organizations and research bodies. His work is widely used, quoted in the Futures literature and is employed in undergraduate and postgraduate courses around the world. He has recently written: *Futures for the Third Millennium: Enabling the forward view* (1999) and *Futures Beyond Distopia* (2004) as well as a revised and updated version of *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies vols 1-4 on CD-ROM* (2005). He is the founder of the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) and currently the President of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF).

Essay
I was born in Portsmouth in 1945 at the end of the Second World War and lived in a terrace house with my parents. It was basically a simple existence. There was not a great deal of money. I still remember rationing cards. As I grew up in that environment the first hint of the fact that the future might be of interest was a boy's comic called "The Eagle," which I began reading when I was about eight or nine years old. "The Eagle" was created by a group of church-based people in the United Kingdom. It was a comic for young people that would provide a sense of optimism and hope that there was something worthwhile to look forward to in the future.

The lead story in "The Eagle" every week was a beautifully illustrated strip of a character called Dan Dare. The person who created this strip was Frank Hampson, a brilliant draftsman. His characters were based on real people - credible characters of men and women. The locations were beautifully drawn. So whether the locale was on earth on a space station, a space ship, or somewhere on another planet you had the feeling of being drawn into this wonderfully realized future. Yes there were high technologies beautifully drawn, beautifully realized. But there were also ecologies. So these other worlds were not just simply extensions of technology and engineering. You had a sense of rich life evolving in other places and in other ways.

Beyond all this there was a sense that the Dan Dare series illustrated the fact that the future could be a wonderful place to live in. There were certainly dangers and some of these were represented by a little green fellow called “the Mekon.” He floated on a small machine above people’s heads directing enormous armies of robots and other creatures. The forces of good and evil were portrayed in this future and they really caught the imagination of a lot of young people, boys and girls, in the UK at that time. So what, in effect, the Dan Dare series did for me was to say, “look, the future may be challenging. But there are real people out there. The issues and problems that undoubtedly exist in the future can be dealt with.” So by the time I was about twelve I had a sense that the future was important, deeply interesting and a very positive thing to look forward to.

It was therefore a natural extension for me to start reading science fiction. I particularly remember a series of what were called “Ace Doubles” beginning during the late 1950s. These were paperbacks produced in the USA with one novella on one side and another on the reverse. Each was illustrated by dramatic images of possible futures. So at that point the future as such began to open out for me. It stopped being singular, one thing. It opened out and started becoming a whole series of possibilities, i.e., futures plural. Therefore the future as a domain was no longer an empty space. It was filled with a huge range of possibilities. Some of them were good. Some of them were bad. I could see that it put before us many opportunities. But also posed a number of very real dangers.

The more science fiction I read the more I saw that downbeat, negative, dystopian futures were dominant. This raised a major question in my mind: “why does the future appear to be such an awful place?” The Dan Dare series in the Eagle had suggested that it could be positive; people could grow and develop, and all kinds of things were possible. Yet the collective message from science fiction seemed to be that the future was dark and dismal. Things were going wrong. Aliens were invading the Earth. Machines were running wild. New species were overwhelming us. All kinds of catastrophes were taking place.

Hence the question: “why *should* the future be such a terrible place?” The answer only became clear over a much longer period of time as I began to realize that what science fiction writers were doing was reflecting aspects of the reality around them. They were taking themes from the real world, extending them, dramatizing them, asking questions like, “what if?” “what if this happens,” “what if that happens?” Yet, overall, as a group of people, they were not finding many solutions.

In other words, science fiction suggested to me, as a young person growing up in England, that our futures, the human future, were very much at risk. Forward thinking, then, at that early stage, began to pose questions about the way we live on the planet now. The fictional futures that I had read about began to help me question the present. Later I also realized that in reading this literature I was unconsciously beginning to develop a whole vocabulary of images and concepts about the future. I later came to see that it was that futures vocabulary that makes it possible for us to understand and operate within the futures domain.

By 1965 when I went to Chester College to train to be a teacher I had started to feel that there were major questions about the way that we were living on planet Earth. I came across a book that was published in 1967 by Edward Leach. It was the BBC Reith Lectures for that year. He called the lectures and the subsequent book (which I purchased) “A Runaway World?” with a question mark. When I read the book I was deeply affected by it. It raised questions and issues that helped me begin to understand the concerns that I’d first gained by reading the science fiction literature.

Moreover, these questions, the kinds of questions he was raising about population, resources, environment (now very common place) contrasted enormously with the curriculum that I was receiving as a student teacher. This was my first insight, the earliest hint, that the education system, the way educators understood their tasks, the way that young people and teachers were being prepared was, it seemed to me, unresponsive to the world picture portrayed in science fiction and in “A Runaway World?” The latter raised key questions about the future, about growth and even at that time, about sustainability. It also touched on issues about the control of technology, about an artificial world. In this way, therefore, I became aware of some of the sources of fear that young people were beginning to experience as well as some of the possible strategies for beginning to deal with change.

Not long after that I went overseas for six years (1969 – 1975) to teach in Bermuda. I can still remember the tremendous thrill I felt when I landed there and, from a working class environment in England, with its grey skies, terraced houses, streets and cities, found myself walking in what appeared to be a tropical (or sub-tropical) paradise: the warmth, the trees, the birds, the beautiful flowers, a wonderfully blue sea and pink coral sand. The houses built mainly of coral blocks. It was an amazing transition.

I was thrilled to be there and became particularly interested in the story of primeval Bermuda, how it had been before people first arrived centuries ago. Then an interesting thing happened. The longer I was there, the more I realized that there was a big difference between the external, surface view of the place (which, as I said, looks like a tourist paradise) and a deeper view which suggested that "something else" was going on under the surface. That metaphor about what's obvious and open and easy to spot in the external world, contrasted with a deeper view of what is happening under the surface, has been something that has informed my thinking and work ever since.

Looking at the surface view in Bermuda you see a beach culture, with coral reefs just offshore. You can snorkel among those reefs. I remember scuba diving amongst the remains of Spanish ships and seeing cannon from the 16th, 17th century tumbled amongst the coral reefs, with fish swimming in and out of them. Beautiful. You can go deep-sea fishing. There's a whole industry, taking people out to go fishing for marlin in the deep oceans. Bermuda is surrounded by very deep oceans so it has access to some of the finest reef viewing, fishing and water sports in the world. It's no wonder it has become a tourist haven. The way of life is slow. The shopping is excellent. The local color is evident.

Yet the longer I lived there, and particularly working with young people in that environment, I sensed that there was something amiss in this apparent paradise. I had no idea what it was initially. But many of the young people were, shall we say, not really aware of the natural qualities of their country. I guess that's true for all of us. Wherever and whenever we're born we take as natural what we see around us.

The young people I worked with did not realize that Bermuda once was a completely natural environment with no people at all. That it was once a land of cedar and palmetto forests with huge numbers of birds nesting on the beaches, in the cliffs, on the cliff tops, and that the first human impacts were from the Spaniards leaving pigs on the island to provide some food should future sailors be shipwrecked there. At that point, the ecology began to change. Young people were not at all attuned to their own history. They saw the islands pretty much as they were at the time, which had been heavily modified through human occupation.

Underneath what we now call environmental issues I perceived what I can only call a kind of "spiritual hunger." I became convinced over the years that the materialistic culture we were living in didn't really supply the kind of things that we all need. It didn't supply the human need for purpose, significance, and value in our lives. They had all the products, all the latest consumer goods, but young people in particular weren't that happy. We saw the beginnings of a negative drug culture and an apparent need for escapism. That's an interesting question, "why would you want to escape if you already live in something that is close to paradise on earth?"

So, in a nutshell, that's why I started searching for a deeper view. Part of it was to understand man's impact on primeval Bermuda. The twentieth century development process led to very rapid change. Then an imported cedar blight accidentally destroyed much of the background cedar forest. As those trees died off so a new forest of houses became visible and the whole aspect of Bermuda changed. Also, behind the visible changes, things were going on that had more to do with processes of social and economic construction.

Before the First World War Bermuda had been a winter market garden for New York. Fruit and vegetables had been grown there and flown or transferred by ship up to the USA. By the time I arrived in the late 60s those areas that were once market gardens had all been built on. Large hotels had been constructed. Cars had been introduced. So it seemed to me that what had once been a paradise (or perhaps as near to it as one could imagine on planet Earth) had become a kind of economic machine that was hooked on growth but in an environment that really couldn't sustain growth over the long term. In other words serious problems were beginning to emerge that were directly related to deeper issues of social and economic construction. There were social and ecological costs. There was a growing dependence of the islands on outside sources of food, finance, all the necessities of daily life.

That was when I discovered a great American writer called Lewis Mumford, particularly his book "The Pentagon of Power." Mumford depicted a long view back over the rise of civilizations. He took the view that language, dreams, the ability to organize dreams through developing an inner life, had developed in humankind on the way towards developing a tool based civilization. He suggested that human beings had to make something of *themselves* before they could make something of the outer world. He therefore suggested that these inner processes of development were in some way "prior to", came before, the external tools and technologies that developed later. That's still a controversial view but it was useful to me because it illustrated another way of looking at things. Maybe this inner world that I had started to glimpse was indeed, in some way, prior to, or at least deeply influenced the external world.

Mumford coined the term "megamachine" for the kind of social organization that developed in early Egypt. Although it made the construction of the pyramids possible he thought that was a dehumanized way of organizing society for ends that were not necessarily constructive. He saw it as a slave culture. He felt that there were some basically wrong turnings, if you like, in the history of humankind at that point. He also suggested that this "megamachine", this organization of men, machines and materials for abstract ends was taken over by the Allies after World War II. He felt that some of those features were built into the way that things developed after that period. Again that's controversial. But it was an interesting thought, sitting there in Bermuda, trying to work all this out.

He was particularly clear about something that he called "the removal of limits," which is something I'd never really thought about before. He portrayed us as living in a dangerously one-sided civilization. One of the key questions that emerged from that was, "how can we recover the human dimension in this context?" Mumford talked about the removal of limits in this way. He said that,

"The new industrial complex is based upon a group of postulates so self-evident to those who have produced the system that they are rarely criticized or challenged – indeed almost never examined – for they are completely identified with the 'new way of life.' There's only one efficient speed, faster; only one attractive destination, farther away; only one desirable size, bigger; only one rational quantitative goal, more…"

When I read this I began to uncover some ways of understanding what had happened in Bermuda. I thought it should have been possible at some point in the past to say, "ok, we've had enough growth. We've got enough houses. We've got enough hotels. Let's run Bermuda as a steady state and keep the things that are most valuable about it for future generations." Clearly that had *not* happened. So when I left in 1975 and went back to the UK it was with a series of major questions. I felt that I'd been living in the middle of an unintended global experiment that was very much about how much growth, how much development, how much technology you can pack into a small, 20 square mile, island? In many ways Bermuda was a kind of laboratory that, because of its very small size, showed up, exaggerated to some extent, some of the issues that were more universal: issues concerning development, growth, technology and the nature of society.

Fortunately, at the University of Lancaster, there was a "School of Independent Studies" intended for people such as myself who had some sense of what they wanted to do, some questions. The school was able to help you design your own degree. Now I had not done particularly well at school. One of the reasons for that was that I struggled to operate under a schedule that someone had been laid on me from above, as it were. Whereas at Lancaster, they were saying something quite different "have you got some viable research questions that you want to pursue? If so, we'll help you work them into a viable research program."

So the upshot was that I did a first degree at Lancaster in the School of Independent Studies. I wrote a number of dissertations on science fiction, futures, Dams in the third world, a variety of issues focused around the general theme of "Science, Technology and the Human Future". It was then that I began to see that there was indeed a field that took the future seriously. I had never realized that up to then. So when I discovered that field I started reading and investigating and finding out, well, what was it about? How did it work? What were the key ideas? That all went so well that I stayed on at Lancaster to do a PhD and ended up looking at Futures in Education. Not, let me add, the future *of* education, which is an extrapolative exercise that, in my view at least, is much less productive. The principle of futures *in* education brings with it a whole series of possibilities

that reinvigorate the area, make it something more lively, more interesting, more relevant, more keyed to the real issues of the world and young people's needs.

In 1980, half way through my PhD, I went to a global conference on futures in Toronto and for the first time met a number of teachers who considered themselves to be "teachers of futures". This was the final confirmation I needed. It demonstrated that futures work was viable. It could be carried out in schools. There really was something to be achieved here. So I went back to Lancaster and finished the PhD.

When that was completed there was an awkward gap and I was not able to find work immediately. Fortunately a post-doctorate fellowship turned up which meant that I was able to begin applying the ideas in the PhD to some practical implementation issues. So I surveyed futures courses and began to compile a book called "Futures Tools and Techniques." I helped design some Masters units and began further developing the notion of "critical futures." I'd started work on that in my PhD and so used the time to develop it further.

In 1987 I wrote a piece for the journal Futures called "Future Vision in the Nuclear Age," in which I at least satisfied myself that despite the most appalling futures that one could imagine that there is indeed "light at the end of the tunnel." That was dramatically confirmed by a visit to an intentional community in Scotland called Findhorn where, to cut a long story short, I had a visionary experience which persuaded me that beneath all the negativity, all the problems and all the dangers in the world there are sources of insight, energy and power that can take us way beyond those fears and those futures.

In 1986 I was invited to Australia for a "Futures in Education" conference and there I had the pleasure of working with an organization called The Commission for the Future. It'd been set up in 1985 and represented one of the first working examples that I came across of an organization built specially to look at futures issues. Later I returned to Australia and worked in the Institute of Education at the University of Melbourne where I developed and tried out some mainstream masters units in futures studies. That was what persuaded me that it was through a grounding in futures concepts, images and tools that provided people with a valuable starting vocabulary. Every year I saw a group of maybe 12, 15, 20 people turn up to take a Master's unit on futures with no prior background knowledge of the field. I saw the way that some of them struggled at first with some of the concepts and underlying ideas. I saw the way that a dialogue developed with each other, with people outside the course, and how, as time went by, the "lights went on" in people's eyes. They got it. They could begin to put things together differently. They saw the world differently. They were able to put together knowledge that had been separated by artificial boundaries of knowledge fields. And they could begin to see that there were many, many positive ways forward. It was there that I collaborated on my first mainstream book with Professor Hedley Beare called "Education for the Twenty First Century." It was a very straightforward book. It was written to be easily read, easily understood. It began a whole series of publications that followed on later.

One of the highlights for me was a World Futures Studies Federation Conference in Beijing in 1988. I particularly remember and value walking on the Great Wall of China with Robert Jungk, a leading European futurist and pioneer of our field. He'd been to Hiroshima after the war. He'd written many books asserting the primacy of human interests over technological interests in the future. I looked up to him, really, as a mentor and indeed he very much welcomed me into the field. So that personal mentoring, those personal contacts with people who had "walked the walk," seem to me to be one of the "secrets" of doing this work well. In Beijing I attended my first board meeting of the journal Futures and I still remember looking around that circle of people and realizing that, for the first time, I was sitting among some of the legends of the field. People like Robert Jungk, Eleonora Masini, Hazel Henderson and Hugues de Jouvenel. There was intense inter-cultural dialogue in Beijing. The Chinese people who came to the conference had gone to tremendous effort, a lot of work, to try to communicate with us in what was to them a foreign language. I began to see the World Futures Studies Federation as a vital counterbalance to other organizations in the world.

Increasingly, as time went by, my interests were more and more in deepening my understanding of futures, of finding ways to help it "go mainstream" through books, papers, articles, presentations, conferences, and so forth. In 1998 an opportunity arose in Melbourne, Australia, to create an Institute of Foresight there. To cut another long story short, the Vice Chancellor of the University was looking for a millennium project that would be innovative, that would put something new into the curriculum. I'd always said that if futures became established in Australia it wouldn't be with one of the big mainstream universities. I had worked in several and

it seemed to me there was a kind of embedded arrogance about the way they seem to cover all fields. They seemed in a sense to "already know everything", making it very hard to bring radically new ideas into such contexts. Yet here I was being approached by the head of a smaller institution that, by definition, had to be innovative, had to be quick on its feet, in order to thrive.

The upshot was that in 1999 we established the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University in Melbourne. We designed a three-year program, a graduate certificate in Strategic Foresight, a graduate diploma and a Masters with the option of going on to a PhD. During this time my understanding of futures methodologies had moved from realizing the value of studying the external world (i.e., via empirical approaches) to looking at critical futures and then from there, more recently, seeing the further move toward integral futures. This was made possible by having an Institute and being able to focus a number of people – both colleagues and students - on these questions. Another big learning was that we were able to get philanthropic support for research. I realized that there's a profound identity of interest between futures workers and those philanthropists who are trying to do what they can to deal with embedded social problems and help create a better world. One of our main intentions was to develop a new generation of foresight practitioners. This fitted well with our major goal of supporting the emergence of social foresight. As of 2005 both goals had made very substantial progress.

In Brasov, Romania, in September 2001, I took on the presidency of the World Future Studies Federation and we began a process of renewal: a new website, a virtual secretariat, beginning a futures archive, working on the history of the Federation. We began work on a special issue of Futures. We began to work up a global agenda for futures and foresight research, which is obviously a continuing project.

More recently I produced a book called "Futures Beyond Dystopia" because so many major issues in the wider world are still largely unresolved. The most likely futures do still seem to be downbeat, dystopian in character. And, just as I had noted in that early paper on "Future Vision in the Nuclear Age," so now too, all those years later, it seems to me that we need to keep coming back to this issue: how we can actually take control of our destiny and move beyond those "overshoot and collapse" futures?

So my current outlook is to continue with Federation work, support futures in education, continue to develop the critical and integral futures approach and also move into the area of web support. Behind all these activities is a growing sense that the best way for me to move forward on these fronts is to move beyond academia into what I call "the reflective life."

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