

# Who Are Here Now?

## A Letter To My Daughter

### 1. Que sera, sera

Nineteen years ago, just down the road, at St Thomas's Hospital, my daughter, Claudia, was born, prematurely. She had her umbilical cord wrapped round her neck and was being strangled by it, so the consultant recommended that she be delivered a month early. She survived the birth and after a short spell in the intensive care unit, she gained weight and was well.

During her infancy my wife regularly sang to her 'Que sera, sera'. Originally sung by Doris Day in the Alfred Hitchcock's 1956 film, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, this song touches one of humankind's most deep-rooted preoccupations – the future. Or, fear of the future, because as the song suggests, 'the future's not ours to see'. It suggests uncertainty, beyond our ability to consider the odds and take risks. As F. David Peat, in his book *From Certainty to Uncertainty: The Story of Science in the Twentieth Century* writes:

"Quantum theory introduced uncertainty into Physics: not an uncertainty that arises out of mere ignorance but a fundamental uncertainty about the very universe itself. Uncertainty is the price we pay for becoming participants in the universe."

And yet the Nobel Lauriat in Chemistry, Illia Prigogine celebrated the fact that the future is not predetermined. He wrote;

'The inclusion of irreversibility changes our view of nature. The future is no longer given. Our world is a world of continuous "construction" ruled by probabilistic laws and no longer a kind of automaton.'

'We are led from a world of "being" to a world of "becoming"'.<sup>i</sup>

In a journal article on Art and Ecology, I wrote in 2003, I posed the following question:

'From space, looking back at earth, we may see three key issues: the accelerating increase of the human species, the accelerating decrease of other species and the accelerating effects of climate change. We might ask how are we to cope with these changes, creatively?'

It is probably too late to consider Sustainable Development as a viable concept, so what are our possible futures? How might creative notions of re-invention, adaptability and resilience make new forms of well-being?

## 2. Ecological Principles:

From Greek word oikos meaning house or dwelling. The study of organisms, their relationship to each other and their relationship to their environment.

- Diversity – species richness / whole systems
- Interconnectedness – interdependence
- Finite resources – non-equilibrium thermodynamics, entropy, WIGIG Time

## 3. Embodied Mind

According to Lakoff and Johnson's studies, based on second generation cognitive science, we evolved as whole beings, bodies and brains, not separate.

## 4. Embodied Ecology

“There is a common folk theory of evolution, that evolution is a competitive struggle to survive and reproduce. The folk theory has normative implications: Competitive struggle to survive and reproduce is natural. Moreover, it is good, because it got us where we are.”<sup>ii</sup>

We evolved as an integral part of the whole environment, not a separate addition. Interconnectedness and interdependence are central to understanding whole systems ecology.

## 5. Symbiotic Futures

Indeed, the key factor in evolutionary development was when one (mitochondria) cell entered another to live symbiotically. Two cells living together as one organism, completely dependent upon each other, not just for their existence, but for their potential to evolve into multi-cellular organisms – to create a different future.

Culturally, socially we may come from different pasts, but we are brought together in the present to view the future. Not one future but many diverse futures – each dependent on the other. The foresight specialist, Richard Slaughter writes:

‘Integral Futures, thus, does not take a singular perspective; rather it recognises a plurality of perspectives. It is not confined to a single tool or methodology; rather it is aware of the existence of an entire (indeed, infinite) tool kit. It recognises that there are many ways of knowing – many paradigms, practices and methodologies of knowledge seeking – and that no single paradigm can be assigned pre-eminence ... Integral Futures welcomes, embraces and values all careful and sincere approaches to knowledge seeking in all spheres of human activity to which they are both appropriate and adequate – including analytical rationality, intuitive insight and spirituality.’<sup>iii</sup>

## 6. Re-invention

Living things need to re-invent themselves to stay alive. As dissipative structures, far from equilibrium, our cells know how to reproduce through autopoiesis, or self making. Now, as an artist, I find the idea of this capacity for making, or creating very interesting. Indeed, the root of the word Art is *rt*. Coming from the Indian *Rg Vedas*, it means the dynamic process by which the whole cosmos continues to create itself, virtuously.

## 7. Adaptability

With regard to surviving climate change, mitigation is important for the future, but our current weather is based on conditions thirty years ago and the accelerated release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses from the past thirty years will bring further unprecedented and unpredictable effects of global warming. So, **our ability to adapt to these changes is of equal importance.**

One of the things, as an artist and an educator, I hope to do is to ‘keep the discourse plastic’. Climate change is not just about reducing carbon and methane emissions and maintaining power supplies for further development. There are many, many other issues, that our society chooses to ignore, or play down and each of these issues will contribute to a myriad of possible futures, not a few socially managed choices.

So, how can you join the discourse? The answer is **anywhere, any time** – there is no right place or time. All our schools and university curricula, through all the disciplines (all sciences and all arts and humanities) should be concerned with critical futures studies.

The hope is that we might / you might be able to **change the metaphor**. That is change our society’s ‘hard-wired’ thinking on the meaning and necessity for development and progress.

In this way, we / you may be able to **shift the narrative** and change the course, not of ‘the future’, but of **the many futures**.

And, I suggest this is a creative activity that is itself concerned with a form of aesthetics – as all art is concerned with telling stories of one sort or another.

## 8. Resilience

In critical futures studies the concept of resilience is gaining importance. And there is emerging the notion of two predominantly different definitions of resilience. The first, ‘**engineering resilience**’ refers to designing our future for duration, ‘sustainable development’, if you like – maintaining the status quo. But this type of resilience may not be necessarily be good for everyone. Slavery and desertification are less desirable manifestations of this form.

Then there is ‘**ecological resilience**’. At first, ecological resilience seems to be a very depressing option, as it is concerned with our ability to survive collapse. This form

takes its lead from the concept of evolutionary perturbation – how certain species survive big shocks to their system. It's actually not about focusing on the doom and gloom of disaster, it looks to making it through and beyond – projecting through collapse to possible futures. And the notion of re-invention, I mentioned earlier sets the evolutionary precedent here.

## 9. Futures Becoming

The question then remains, 'how might we achieve this virtuously?' Incorporating ethics and aesthetics, this is the question of well-being. Indeed, my friends, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison and I are currently working a project called GREENHOUSE BRITAIN that takes the issue of sea level rise and asks, 'as the waters rise gracefully, will we withdraw with equal grace?' One meaning of the word graceful is 'becomingness'.

In my project for Shrewsbury, *River Life 3000: a dialogue for the beginning of time* (2003), I asked; 'How can I and those I love survive the accelerating effects of climate change?'

Thinking back to my daughter, Claudia, my wife and I were somewhat distressed when we discovered to meaning of her name - it comes from Emperor Claudius and therefore means 'cripple'. However, an Italian friend later explained that it actually means, 'one who survives, or overcomes disabilities'.

So, this presentation is a letter to my daughter, who's future is here now.

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<sup>i</sup> PRIGOGINE, I (2003) *Is Future Given?* World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte Ltd. London. pp 39

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, LAKOFF, G. & JOHNSON, M. (1999) pp 557

<sup>iii</sup> SLAUGHTER, R. 2004. *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight.* RoutledgeFalmer, London pp166