

Images of the Future

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BACKGROUND

Mind you, one expects challenge in dealing with the future, unless one happens to have an inside track on the supernatural. I don't, and indeed the purpose of this manuscript is to make futurism possible for ordinary mortals, as a do-it-yourself enterprise.

As of early 1993, I had been trying to complete a futuring book for ten years—*much* longer than a book usually takes for me—and it just wasn't coming together. Insight came while presenting the gist of the proposed book to a bright and caring group of volunteer leadership professionals in Chicago in February 1993 (Chicago AVA). The insight: Don't try to reduce futurism to a science when, in fact, a lot of it is art. The process is as much metaphor as method; intuitive finesse along with stepwise formula. As such, it can still be useful and practical.

My neatest formulation as of the Chicago experience had nine "precise" steps—just grind them out. In actual practice, the process moved backwards as well as forwards; several steps happened all at once, or skipped, or were transformed into something similar but different. By contrast, the approach born of this chaos relies more on analogy and vision than on scientific steps. That must seem obscure for now, but the future usually is, on first glance, if you're honest about it.

Sequence I remains relatively standard and covers the basic context within which

any approach to futuring must function: definition of the term *futuring*; purposes and benefits in the process; pitfalls and paradoxes. It is what I see as the only satisfactory section from a previous publication entitled *Shapes and Scenarios in the Future of Volunteerism* (Limited circulation, VOLUNTAS, 1989).

The intention is for this material to be useful as-is. This is, nevertheless, a snapshot of a book still being written. In fact, I begin to suspect this book will *always* be in process, never finished, and never "easy reading." That does not excuse intolerance, impracticality, imperfect communication, or boredom. It does, however, invite your partnership in an ongoing evolution of understanding. That evolution may be exceedingly slow. Indeed, what I have mainly learned in preparation of this book is humility. The sense is of venture on the very outer border of things we are given to understand, and maybe in danger of trespass beyond.

SEQUENCE I: DEFINITION, PURPOSES, PITFALLS AND PARADOXES

A. Purposes

Futuring is an attempt to predict trends and events which haven't occurred yet. Usually, it also involves attempts to control these events or at least deflect them in a desired direction.

The future has two parts, one shared by all humanity on our planet, and another

Over the past thirty years, *Ivan Scheier* has been a volunteer, a volunteer coordinator, director of a volunteer center, researcher, author, publisher, and—both in North America and overseas—a trainer and consultant in the field of volunteerism. Involvements have included President of the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars, Executive Director of the National Information Center on Volunteerism, and Chairperson of the Alliance for Volunteerism. Ivan is currently Director of the Center for Creative Community and Dreamcatcher-in-Residence at the VOLUNTAS Retreat Center, headquartered in Madrid, New Mexico.

that is unique to you as an individual, your program, your organization, community, etc. A revolution in Chile is desperately important to the people who live there; it is vastly less urgent and immediate in its future potential for a hospital volunteer program in Peoria. Conversely, an impending \$5,000 local budget cut may be crucial in Peoria, but wouldn't make much difference to the national budget of Chile.

This unique component is the concern of this article, for we believe every person needs to be her or his own futurist. Therefore, competency as a futurist should be added to the list of skills expected of the volunteer leader. Forecasts from Ottawa, Washington, New York, Chicago, Toronto, and Los Angeles are only a rough starting point—unless you happen to live in one of these cities. At best, generic forecasts are full of white spaces that only locals can fill in.

To say that no one else can completely cast and shape the future *for* you, is not to claim it's easy to do for yourself. Futuring is commonly seen as forbidden ground for anyone unprepared to steep in esoterica—or mysticism. Not so. This entire article is invested in demonstrating feasible futuring processes. Indeed, we are already "unconscious futurists" in much of what we do, in planning, leadership, etc. Please reserve judgment on the issue for now, and let the article speak for itself.

B. Why Bother?

For the rest, it's worth repeating that while forecasting has its fascinating moments, it is on the whole a difficult, time-consuming enterprise, requiring considerable tolerance of ambiguity, and having little in the way of supportive equipment. So why bother? Here are some reasons you can use as talking points to convince yourself as well as colleagues and bosses. On that, you'll be confronting a common perception that time spent on futuring is a luxury we can ill afford with so many pressing problems in the present; and anyhow, it's too complex and esoteric for us to handle by ourselves.

Again, why bother?

1. *Sheer curiosity.* Futuring has its satisfactions just as "a spectator sport."

2. *Hope, morale.* Futuring is a chance to escape the frustrations of the present, dream of better days, and plan for them. It is no accident that the theme song of the U.S. civil rights movement was *We Shall Overcome*, and one of its greatest moments the "I have a dream" speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the field of volunteerism, hope as a reason for futuring was suggested by an African-American woman, a volunteer coordinator in a prison—surely a person who deals with challenges aplenty in the present. So, futuring is a process we might expect to sustain and re-energize the burnout-prone careerist, board member, volunteer, etc. Futuring is a great morale-booster at retreats.

3. Somewhat ironically, *attempting to predict the future is one of the best ways to understand the present.* If you plan a future trip to, say, Edmonton, Alberta, it does make a difference whether you're starting from Denver, Colorado, or Melbourne, Australia. If your starting point is Denver and you decide to travel by car, you have to take stock of the current condition of your car, your finances, etc. Similarly, if you're predicting that more youth will be interested in volunteering in the next five years, and you want to attract your share of them, you need first to understand thoroughly the strengths and weaknesses of your *current* work with youth volunteers.

4. Futuring is a path to *empowerment* because it enables us *to exercise at least some control over our destiny* as individuals or as organizations. The position is somewhere between two extremes in belief about the nature of reality. At one extreme, we are helpless spectators of a totally predetermined future. If you don't like it, get off the planet! At the other extreme, the future is totally random, and cannot be influenced. You might still want to get off the planet, but in this case you can't even *find* the planet.

Our view is intermediate: Sometimes, to some extent, you can intervene to shape the

future in a desired direction; you also have an equivalent capacity to choose courses of action leading to disaster. To be sure, if a lightning strike is headed your way in the immediate future, you don't have any real choice in regard to moving out of its way. But, you might have had some prior choices which determined how vulnerable you would be to a lightning strike. Again, though one U.S. presidential candidate claimed otherwise, we ordinary mortals can't stop predicted hurricanes. Nevertheless, foreknowledge can help us prepare for them and soften their negative impact. In both these examples, prediction can at least facilitate avoidance of the inevitable, or preparation to deal with its impact.

There are possible gradations in degree of control for us. If, to use the previous example, a larger pool of potential youth volunteers is predicted for the future, there is much we can choose to do or not do to make our program more attractive to them. At this level of time-expressed empowerment, we have Gregory Baum's ringing declaration: "Every person is called upon to create their own future."

5. To a certain extent, futurists do more than forecast a fixed future; they can creatively *invent* futures. The futurist perspective is a necessary ingredient in long-range planning because it helps us to understand clearly that any future is a mix of our capability and the world's inevitability. Some planners operate—unconsciously perhaps—as if they had total power to shape the future. This is like planning for a picnic, the food, entertainment, location, etc., without taking account of weather predictions, e.g., the possibility of a storm which we do *not* control. For this reason, good long-range planning is full of alternative plans (Bs, Cs, and etc.) to take account of future "outside" influences we don't control. Again, consider the hospital auxiliary which plans to use next year's gift shop revenue to purchase needed equipment for the hospital. Some future inevitabilities not under complete control of the auxiliary had better be considered in this plan, for example:

- Will hospital policy or economic hard times cut into gift shop revenues next year?
- Will the hospital move to place management and staffing of the gift shop more directly in hospital hands rather than as a volunteer operation?

6. *Futuring* not only recognizes that we can to some extent control our own future, but also *recognizes how the future may influence us*. The conventional view of causation is that individuals or organizations are largely the product of what has gone before—the past pushing us into the future. This view underestimates the extent to which, conversely, the future *pulls* us toward it. Some of the most effective and fulfilled people and organizations I know live in the grip of dreams, refusing as they can the restrictions of their past. Indeed, the nicest thing anyone ever said about VOLUNTAS is that it is an organization that lives five years in the future. (Not everyone on our board is entirely pleased with that assessment, I might add.) Philosopher José Ortega y Gasset makes the point eloquently: "Life is a series of collusions with the future; it is not so much a sum of what we have been, but what we yearn to be."

7. Once again, the increased ability to control our destiny and the future visioning it involves, combine to suggest that *futuring is an essential component of long-range planning*.

8. Clearly, too, the individual or organization that looks ahead to explore and implement possible futures, has more *opportunities for creativity and effective problem-solving*, especially for tough problems that have resisted conventional attempts at solution in the present.

9. Competency in *futuring* is a vital ingredient in effective *leadership*. As John Gardner reminds us, the difference between a manager and a leader is the ability to capture and communicate a positive vision of the future.

10. Finally, let's hear it for the current *popularity* of *futuring*. We've seen how fu-

turing ties us to a number of key concepts in contemporary thinking, such as empowerment, creativity, leadership, long-range planning, etc. Beyond that, the calendar contributes to the importance currently attached to futuring by decision-makers in foundations, government, media, politics, etc.—all of them potentially powerful allies for us as individual programs or organizations. Moreover, as noted at the end of this section, I think the current popularity of futuring might last a long while, this time around.

C. Paradoxes in Predicting the Future (or at least puzzlements)

1. *Just making a prediction tends to change it.* The prediction that continuing your current sunbathing habits substantially increases the risk of skin cancer can change behavior in a way to help make that prediction less likely. Similarly, the confident forecast that United Way will reach its ambitious fundraising target this year can create optimism and mobilize resources in such a way as to make success more likely. Conversely, pessimistic predictions may negatively impact performance as self-fulfilling prophecy, and *overly* optimistic ones simply set you up for failure. In every case, though, the process of prediction tends to affect its product.

2. *The "easiest" predictions are often the best (most accurate).* As a general rule, I suggest you start with predictions most likely to come true, if only to build morale in this uncertain business. I usually begin a day-long workshop on futuring by predicting we will break for lunch about 11:45 AM, and I go on from there to prophesy death, taxes, and formal volunteer recognition banquets. I once finished a futuring workshop with a forecast that if we met again years hence, participants would still not know how to spell my name. We did, and they didn't.

One good basis for "sure things" is their unvarying occurrence in the past, though even here we should be prepared to deal with the occasional "mutant emergent." This Frankensteinian term was coined by

professional futurists to include usually unpleasant (to put it mildly) surprises like the atomic bomb, which changed the nature of warfare, and, in more recent times, the AIDS virus. The mutant emergent can sometimes be a pleasant surprise, as cold fusion will be if it works out as a practical energy source. But mutant emergents tend to be traumatic; for example, the surprise firing of the top executive you were counting on to continue active, positive support of your program.

Sticking to shorter future time frames is another way to increase the probability of prophecy; I suggest between six months and three years. Less than six months (say, next week) may be too easy, and, in any case, doesn't usually allow enough time to prepare for predicted events or react to them. Very long-term predictions may be fun as fantasy, but are less useful as strategy. As time unfolds, the lattice of possibilities increases geometrically, or even astronomically, and is soon beyond the realm of ordinary probability. To be sure, I was once told by someone who lived in an Asian community, that Asian people tend to plan successfully in 20-year time frames! Perhaps so. I only suggest (enviously) that they probably cycle back to adjust predictions more often than every 20 years.

A third way of increasing the certainty of predictions is to predict the options people or organizations will have rather than try to foresee exactly which of these options they will take. For example, it may be easier to prophesy that a healthy new volunteer program will be faced at some point with a growth/no growth decision, than to predict which way it will go at such a crossroads.

3. *"Backcasting" is the best preparation for forecasting.* "Back-and-forth casting" is even better. This is the wisdom in Churchill's warning: "The nation that forgets its history, has no future." Or, at least, that nation will have little *understanding* of its future. Only consider: the major way we have to predict the future is to project trends from the past and present. If I don't "backcast" to discover that an executive

has had much experience in the past as a volunteer, and what kind of experience that was, there's a lot I will miss in forecasting how that executive will support my volunteer program. Nor is such backcasting always as simple as discovery of fixed facts. Totalitarian governments may be the worst offenders in rewriting history (à la George Orwell), but most of us do it to some extent, especially when faced with failure or exposure. The backcaster in such situations must be able to penetrate self-deception as well as deliberate dissembling.

"Back-and-forth casting" is a delving into history to find whether your program or organization did some futuring, the predictions of which have already come due. A great deal can be learned from what these predictions were, which ones were accurate, which were not, and why. But we rarely do that. I've participated in about 15 futuring studies in volunteerism and returned to the scene of the crime only twice at due date. The idea seems to be much like "do good and disappear," only here it is more like "predict and disappear," or at least have the decency to die before your prophecy comes to term. Whenever possible, I would very much like to see prognosticators brought back on or near the target date of their predictions to discuss results. Perhaps then, wiser for the experience, they could forecast the next slice of the future.

I once had a valuable experience of this type. In 1968, as a coordinator of volunteers and sometime trainer in criminal justice volunteerism, I predicted that volunteers would just about disappear from the criminal justice system in five years even though in 1968 volunteers were entering the system at a substantial and steadily increasing rate. I prophesied this in a national newsletter out of deep concern that increasing numbers of volunteers were simply exacerbating already strong correctional staff resistance to volunteers, while we as coordinators stood by and did little but deplore the situation.

By 1973 my prediction was mercifully forgotten (as they usually are), except by

me. I say "mercifully" because my estimate of no volunteers left was off only by about half a million! Interestingly enough, however, the *rate* of increase had begun to flatten out, and within a few years the *number* of volunteers in the system leveled off, e.g., *stopped* increasing. So, though the prediction was a disaster, statistically speaking, the warning it was wrapped in—start doing something about staff resistance to volunteers—probably should have been better heeded. And I learned plenty about the awesome momentum (inertia) of what was essentially a social movement of volunteers into the criminal justice system of that time. Even if the track is blocked, you don't stop a freight train all at once.

4. *The best way to predict the future is also the worst.* As just noted, the best, perhaps the only way, to foresee the future is by taking a running start from the past. The danger is that in so doing, we will underestimate the subtlety of nature. This happens when we go beyond acceptance of past influences on the future to assume that the past will influence the future *in the same way* as it influences the present. That usually doesn't happen; current trends accelerate, decelerate, or even reverse themselves. And even when you can predict more or less of a vital factor in the volunteer future—e.g., more working women, seniors, youth, the very process of management itself—you cannot be sure these factors will *behave* in the same way in the future.

5. *The assumptions that served so well in the past may be the greatest barriers to imaginative visualizing of positive futures.* The entertaining of new and different assumptions enables us to imbue our possible future with qualitative as well as mere quantitative change. Only consider the barrenness of assuming that more older people in the future simply means more people in need of services. Once that anchor assumption is lifted, we are able to see that more older people in the future can also mean more wonderful volunteers to *provide* service. It is certainly not neces-

sarily good news for the rocking chair business.

D. Pitfalls: Some Things to Be Careful of

1. Try to be clear and consistent on who or what you will be predicting for or about. Yourself as an individual? Your volunteer program? Your organization or group as a whole? Your association or coalition? Your neighborhood? Your community? Your nation? Your choices in a framework for futuring are wide. Only be sure you carefully choose the “unit of study” you most want and stick to it. To be sure, you can’t separate entirely the fate of your program/organization from yourself as an individual. But, at some point, you might leave that program so the strands must be separable.

2. Beware acting as if your program or organization were an island unto itself, unconnected to the mainland. In fact, the parts of the future in which you are most interested, such as youth development or volunteerism, are connected to the whole of society, e.g., the economy and/or major social demographic trends. Early on, you must therefore identify, from the society at large, what the futurists call “environmental factors” or outside influences which are likely to have an impact upon you and your life.

3. Recognition of the importance of environmental factors that have an impact on the phenomenon studied does not mean that phenomenon is entirely passive; it may also act back upon these environmental factors. Thus, volunteerism not only will be affected by factors such as recession and/or an aging population, but also may affect those factors; for example, by helping to keep chronologically older people younger, both psychologically and physiologically. Also, we are beginning to realize that volunteers can contribute to economic development in a number of significant ways, at least to mitigate recession effects.

4. As already noted, the glamour of far future frameworks lures us with opportunity for fantasy. Less glamorous shorter frameworks, nevertheless, are your best bet if you seriously intend to help shape your own future; that is, unless time spans are *too* short, in which case you endanger making the goal too small. At the other extreme, overly long time frames might signify lack of commitment to actually making the goal happen.

5. Wishful thinking is the curse of the unwary futurist. There’s a powerful, usually unconscious temptation to read into the future what you *hope* will happen. Beware that, but know that deliberate self-conscious visualization of the ideal may have a place in realistic prophecy. In fact, futurists sometimes deliberately project three scenarios in studying a phenomenon: the *best* possible or ideal future; the most *likely* future; and the *worst* possible, or disaster scenario.

6. There is always a flurry of futuring around each year that ends in a zero—the turn of a decade—and volunteerism futuring has been no exception. What happens when we reach the year with *three* zeroes at the end will probably be more like an orgy than a flurry. The more immediate point is the mistake of seeing future study as a relatively rare, elaborate and often ritualistic *occasion* rather than a *routine ongoing process*. Let’s break the pattern of making a future prediction every ten years and forgetting it within ten months. Instead, let’s continually cycle back to evaluate, refine and renew our predictions. Indeed, a circle without end is one of the alternative images of the future.

Look for “Sequence II, Modeling the Future,” to appear in the Fall Issue of *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*.