

FUTURES THROUGH STORIES

Sohail Inayatullah

Narratives, which are often based on metaphors, are important. Indeed decisive in policymaking and strategy. ‘The metaphor’, Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, once wrote, ‘is perhaps one of man’s most fruitful potentialities.... Its efficacy verges on magic’. How one uses metaphor can define the results that are created. As we know from many studies, if crime is described as a friend then there is greater likelihood of subjects arguing for jails and punishment. If we present crime as a social problem, then the intended policy result is more likely to be increased funding for education and poverty eradication. In the USA, if one argues for welfare, then interest in the legislative bill drops dramatically. If one suggests charity for the poor, then it goes up. The welfare discourse creates the image of the person who does not work hard, indeed, games the system; the other of the innocent poor.

During the Brexit referendum campaign, the Leavers focused on ‘taking charge’ and it is ‘not fair’, thus evoking a strategy of empowerment. Stories do not describe reality, they create reality. Stories create us. They matter. We should not be surprised at how well campaigners do as they argue for ‘law and order’ – this is code for spending on the military and safety for those who feel threatened by changing demographics supported by ‘liberal elites’. In the recent 2018 mid-term American elections, Trump focused on the caravan of asylum seekers moving toward the US. He wished to evoke himself as the protector of the nation against the unclean outsiders in contrast to weak Democrats, who would allow them in and thus endanger society. Immigration is one of the clearest battlegrounds of a story.

Indeed, most battles and visions are metaphorical. Each perspective tells a different story. Every world religion has been based on challenging the dominant narrative and creating a new story. And there is no way out, in

the sense of a world outside a story, even if some argue for a meta story of stories, for even that becomes a story.

We can, however, explore the stories we tell ourselves. We can ask if we are being used by these stories or if these stories are serving us. Stories thus become assets for personal and collective change. By inquiring into stories, we can only reduce their impact on us – that is, we can be choosing – active agents – instead of letting the narrative define us.

So let me begin this essay with my own narrative and then shift to methods that can help us create new personal, institutional and global narratives.

Narratives and Futures Studies

It is usual for a speaker to be introduced, his or her brief biography is read, before the speech is given. On a number of occasion after I have spoken I am asked: ‘how old are you?’. Or: ‘Do you ever sleep?’

When I unpacked this - why was I working so hard – I found a number of layered reasons. Systemically, it was the migrant story, trying to make it first in the USA, and then later in Australia. My operating worldview was a world of hierarchy – a clear sense of which activities were above and which were below. The core metaphor was climbing up the ladder, a step at a time, while eyeing that those at the top of the ladder were not trying to push one back down or getting rid of the ladder all together.

But where did this need to climb up emerge? When was the worldview framed? For me, I remember my primary school teacher in fourth grade at the state school in Bloomington, Indiana, asking me: ‘Do you know why Pakistan is so poor?’ I responded I did not. At the feeling level, I wondered why she had singled me out. She then said; ‘Because you people are lazy’. This set up a lifelong pattern of proving her wrong. It has only been in the past ten years when I have begun to question the second order implications of this narrative. While hard work has led to external benefits, over the past decade, I have moved to work-life balance with time for family, time for nature, and friends. Work continues, but now it is not the ladder per se, but the bench at the beach park. This is code for: nature, play, time with loved ones, plus being able to work in relaxed environments. I remember my children years ago, holding a protest at my home office, yelling out:

'No more email, no more email'. A few days later I removed myself from all listserves – these were fun for debates but time consuming and were taking me away from what really mattered. Recently, my wife had suggested that I was still bringing work to the beach (my beach bench had become a work bench); perhaps it was time to have short or long periods without the bench or ladder. Essentially, this is undoing the ladder and hard work toward other frames of reference – just swimming at the beach – a flatter connecting and more enjoyable experience.

Narratives as mentioned earlier are powerful ways to frame what one is doing, what is emerging, and what one intends to do. One can frame this in terms of horizons. Horizon one is the current practice; horizon two, the emerging practice, and horizon three, the desired future. In my own professional life, this has shifted from planting seeds, to nurturing young trees to creating a forest of foresight. This narrative emerged when I was asked by UNESCO to apply for the UNESCO Chair in Futures Studies. The application process was somewhat of a catalogue of activities. I was in search of a conceptual framework. Once I saw futures in my own life as a narrative then the process became significantly easier.

While clearly the memories from primary school set up the pattern of hard work, the first stage of my professional career can be best described as the apprentice, learning how to garden. I spent a year as a graduate assistant in Statistics. From there, I moved to the Hawaii Judiciary, where I spent a decade engaged in foresight. I was first an intern, then a futures planner, then the senior policy analyst in the Office of Planning and Statistics. It would only be in 2005 or so that I understood what I had been doing. The great American New Age psychologist and founder of the Foundation for Mind Research, Jean Houston asked me at a workshop we were conducting about my life history. Then she said: 'ah ah, the Judiciary was your apprenticeship'. I instantly understood. Her medieval categorisation worked as it gave me insights as the courts were where I learned the practice of futures studies and institutional change.

During the final years of my apprenticeship, I returned to the University and finished a doctorate on macrohistory and the works of Indian philosopher, P.R. Sarkar, comparing his theories to ibn Khaldun, Karl Marx, Pitirim Sorokin, Auguste Comte, and others. There was then a period of three years of wandering, figuring the next phase of life.

Eventually, I moved to Australia to work at a University and began to engage in the spread of macrohistory and futures studies.

Then, when I was asked about my auto-biographical framework, I would suggest seed planting. It was only decades later when I was writing the UNESCO application, that I realised I was thinking of the eighteenth century American nurseryman Johnny Appleseed. He was an idiosyncratic vegetarian who was planting apple seeds all over the Midwest of the USA. But Appleseed did not just throw seeds randomly. He created nurseries where ever he went. This certainly became the next phase of my life - the shift from giving lectures and workshops throughout Australia and the Asia-Pacific as seed planting to finding particular young trees to nurture. These became specific clients or sites of futures innovation; they were organisations and institutions like Tamkang University, the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Federal Department of Agriculture, particularly bio-security, local city councils and local government throughout Southeast Queensland and Victoria, Malaysian universities such as University Science Malaysia (USM) and the Malaysian leadership academy, the Pearls of Policing, the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland government, and Mt Eliza Executive Education. I would run visioning workshops, short courses, and supervise doctoral students. Individuals and projects were nurtured. Over a period of fifteen years, I could see the nurseries gaining in strength, the networks through their own volition, expanding.

However, for the UNESCO position, for my next phase, something more was needed. The narrative shift was the creation of a forest of foresight – an ecology of futures. In this project, the seed planter becomes far less important, as the forest maintains itself. It is sustainable. Picking or choosing which are the best foresight projects – the tallest or most robust trees – becomes far less important than ensuring the ecology of the forest as a whole not just survives but thrives. It is this narrative that led to the birthing of the Asia-Pacific Futures Network. We have no presidents or secretaries rather it is a flow of information, courses, and conferences. The network grows the forest - is the forest.

But this is not all about nurturing trees and the eco-system. Within this story, much needs to be pruned. There can be horrible low quality futures studies work. Many are individuals who do not have the passion, but are

'johnny come latelies' consultants, there for the quick buck. They provide forecasts with false precision. Instead of questioning the future, or challenging the framing of the question, they reinforce current assumptions. For example, in the transport planning context, is the issue merely forecasting private car demand and enhancing speed or creating new models of public and private mobility and connectivity? A questioning process would create new pathways for innovation. Forecasting merely provides data to the question within its current terms - it does not extend the terms of reference.

Moreover, they fall into the trap of futurist as knower of the future. Instead of coming to terms with uncertainty and enhancing agency, 'the answer' is provided. More important for me is helping individuals and organisations embark on a deeper learning journey. The consultant or forecasting brand of foresight and futurist needs to be challenged as to the scientific rigour of their utterances and their unexamined assumptions. There can also be individuals with a fetish for promoting their own particular brand or to gain access to funds instead of understanding that UNESCO is there to twine networks, to enhance complexity, and ensure robustness – to link all the philosophical tents, not to privilege particular epistemological positions. Thus, quality control is a must. Some trees need to be cut down so the forest can regrow - some theoretical perspectives are nonsensical, litany based. For example, there is a group of foresight experts who wish to live forever. While I understand this pushes the boundaries of longevity science, what they disown is their own fear of death – the future creates anxiety and fear for them. Instead of owning this fear, they search for the 'silver bullet' and hope they will stay alive for another forty years. And when the singularity – the supposed invention of superintelligent technology that transforms humanity – comes, they hope they can live forever in a downloaded form. They are unable to see that they are living the traditional religious narrative; the singularity is merely the avatar returning so that eternal life for the chosen is possible. One creates a technological heaven; another a mystical heaven. Both are often unable to see the deeper myths that underlie their utterances.

Futures can be seen in itself as layered. The easiest and greatest demand is for tools and methods to help forecast or manage complexity or gain a working map of how the world is changing. While important, many merely

seek to add tools instead of seeing how they can be used to make a strategic difference. The next layer is futures for strategy, to help individuals, organisations, institutions, nations and other collectivities use the future to optimise their goals, to enhance productivity or meet changing citizen needs. This is empowering and certainly a worthy endeavour. However, futures done well becomes post-strategic. What I have learned is that strategy is often within the current framework. Certainly within the framework of the dominant organisational ego. It is more, more, and more. Transformative futures seeks to go beyond strategy by ensuring the selves that seek to optimise are understood: disowned selves questioned. Instead of the strategic plan, anticipatory action learning results. Solutions are not a list of official actions but emerge from ‘where the energy is’ – where there is passion and excitement for change. Transformative futures is learning based. It also seeks to integrate rational and emotional dimensions. The future is not merely a place but a feeling, a possibility of change. It has an expansion dimension, a deeply inclusive dimension, and integrates as much as possible different dimensions of what it means to be human – technological and spiritual, if you will. But for transformation to even have the possibility, as a futurist, I have to be upfront with my biases and positions. I need to often leave my role as an expert, a professor, at the door. Rather, what I have learned is that our role is transmutation, to not be the smartest in the room, but to help bring out the intelligence in everyone else in the room. It is their show, we are there to facilitate emergence. For me, two metaphors are critical. The first is the Whirling Dervish, the Sufi mystic, holding the space, the centre, even as the world dances around her/him. He/she remains fixed on the beauty within and without. The second is microvita, or the hypothesis that what is, is pockets of consciousness that are both material and mind. Futures done well, authentically, can lead to the moment of collective insight when magic, even the sacred, enters the room.

Thus, the new narrative of the forest of foresight creates, cooperates and when needed prunes that which is not needed or has become overly dominant (putting the entire forest at risk). It also seeks to move the ecology of foresight from being focused on tools and methods, to strategies (what is called strategic foresight) to inner and outer transformation, to

emergence in the context of enhanced agency. The forest can become a magical place for deep change.

Casual Layered Analysis

While my metaphors may be interesting for some readers, for others this is merely idiosyncratic. However, the basis question is how can others use stories to access their life choices and create alternative personal and societal futures. We need a clear methodology to do this.

For the last thirty years, I have been using Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). CLA links narrative with strategy, with the litany of reality. It attempts to ensure that 'culture does not eat strategy for breakfast'. CLA both maps narratives as well as seeks to move from the current narrative to a transformed narrative. It intends to add depth to the futures discourse, which are often based on scenarios. Scenarios create other possibilities, they broaden our engagement with contingency and novelty. CLA, however, deepens, going to other layers of reality to create solutions to problems that do not go away.

CLA is defined by its four levels. These are the litany, social/systemic causes, discourse/worldview, and myth/metaphor. The first level, the litany, is the official unquestioned future. It is the tip of the iceberg, the quantifiable measure of reality. These can be headlines, quantitative reports or key performance indicators.

The second level is the systemic. It is person invariant. It consists of the social, technological, economic, environmental and political causes and solutions of the litany. The data of the litany is explained and questioned – mapped and analysed – at this second level. Social science solutions as well as those suggested by managers and engineers appear at this level. The third level is the discourse/worldview. Deeper, unconsciously held ideological and discursive assumptions are unpacked at this level. Instead of the lack of history of the litany or the short-term historical of the system, deep history is used to identify causes and possibilities. As well, how different stakeholders construct the litany and system is explored. The fourth level is the myth/metaphor, the unconscious emotive dimensions of the issue. This is the level of poets and writers, as well as of marketing experts. They seek not detail, but broad brushes of possible realities.

The challenge is to conduct research and praxis that move up and down these layers of analysis to ensure that different ways of knowing are included. Different perspectives (including those of stakeholders, ideologies and epistemes) are in particular brought in the third and fourth levels – at the levels of worldview and myth/metaphor. This allows for breadth. These differences are then used to reconstruct the more visible levels – social policy and litany. Thus, in the transformed future, the system that supports and the litanies that empirically measure the new reality are transformed.

Conceptual movement through depth and breadth, allows for the creation of authentic alternative futures and integrated transformation. CLA begins and ends by questioning the past, present, and future, and thus in creating alternative and preferred futures.

Case Studies

I seek to change the core metaphor and narrative with groups I work with and link it to strategy. For example, Brett Casey from Queensland Deaf Services suggests we should shift from hearing/seeing deafness as a loss of hearing to deafness as ‘gaining of deafness’. By gaining deafness it is now an asset, signing as a new language. Based on this approach he seeks to design and create a new integrated deafness suburb in Australia. His narrative approach moves the person with hearing loss not as a victim of losing one’s community, but as a victor gaining a new community, and eventually, in integration. Inclusion results from his shift in the story. But it is not just the story shift but a new measureable result – the new city/suburb – that is critical, otherwise empty words result.

A participant in a futures workshop in Melbourne who is engaged in left leaning social justice causes seeks to transform the metaphor of his law firm from David/Goliath to the Polio vaccine. In the new future, instead of being reactive and waiting for distressing cases to come to them, they engage, lobby, legislate, change public opinion so as to prevent inequity. This changes the nature of their law firm. One African organisation focused on creating employment opportunities for the youth bulge moved their story from ‘pummelled by the present’ to ‘a flock of eagles.’ What this meant is that they returned to purpose and vision instead of the daily

battle with administrative issues that tired them. Since the time of the futures intervention, they have become part of their nation's broader work strategy. While they are still engaged in front line efforts of jobs, they have moved to an intervention and strategy of creating meaning and dignity.

Metaphors work and then because of changing external conditions cease to be relevant. It is at that time new stories are needed. In libraries, the traditional metaphor of the collector in charge of the collection is no longer as relevant because of the spread of Google and now AI. Librarians are in search of new narratives. There are many: one that stands is the innovator in the new knowledge gardens. This moves the librarian from the known to the unknown, to actively creating desired futures, mapping out the new gardens (AI, micro-manufacturing, libraries as publishers, libraries as places for community making, direct brain downloads). The new metaphor with the new discourse – narrative – suggests experimentation, new sources of funding, a new strategy for human resources. It marks a shift in deep culture. Traditional librarians certainly will have to transform what they do, and how they think about who they are, and can be.

One CEO of a leading Olympics swimming nation who took a recent CLA course focused on changing the core metaphor of his strategy. He was focused on the last millisecond, the moment if a gold is won or not. Strategy for him had been about preparing for that moment. However, the futures process broadened his approach. While he had been successful at helping his nation win Olympic medals, the life of these Olympians after the games was far less stellar – spouse abuse, alcoholism, drug use were common issues they faced after leaving the limelight. He realised he was overly focused on the last second, instead of their overall life. He changed his metaphor to the water park – not just the Olympic pool and events after the victory, but other events after the games – their broader full life path.

Another large energy company when asked about their current story, suggested the 'pretender.' They have lofty vision statements, but none of these are real – they are too far removed from their current culture. In the narrative foresight process, a new story emerged – that of the energy genie. The genie would use big data, connect that data with customers so they had real time access to their energy use, and over time create integrated energy cooperatives and networks. The genie eventually would create energy anytime and anywhere.

Narrative thus helps create new realities. But this does not mean all stories coexist. Rather, one story wins out over other stories. This can be because of its memetic advantage (more efficient, greater insight, relevance, resonance) or because of political interests. During the global financial crises, there were numerous competing stories attempting to make sense of the new reality: was the 'financial crisis' a housing crisis because of bad debt (lazy citizens) or bad banking (a few bad apples that were stretching the rules) or because of the rise of Asia (more hard working, better savers, hungrier) or globalisation (contagion). How one frames the story, leads to different conclusions. Given the conceptual and political power of the narrative of 'too big to fail', the winner was 'wall street' and not 'main street'.

Narrative is Very Personal

CLA can be applied not just to the external but also to the inner world of meanings and lived experiences – the litany of self-representation, the system of identities, the discourses of the architecture of the mind, and foundational myths and metaphors that define the construction of identity, of being and becoming, of the reality of trauma and the possibility of transcendence. CLA explores current stories that we tell ourselves and seeks to create new narratives for individuals that more effectively represent their desired futures.

One South African apartheid fighter changed his metaphor from the 'knight in shining armour' to the road builder. His new environment did not require an adversarial approach, rather, strategies that created bridges and were localised were far more important. He did not willingly move in this direction. It was based on his experience that his earlier conditioning led to a particular narrative which was far less useful now.

These new metaphors then shape personal reality in novel ways. The old story that was created through an interaction with people and the environment is no longer functional and new metaphors are required. One participant in a workshop changed her house story:

I changed my metaphor in the last weeks: From rooted, 'settled' and a bit lethargic, living in an old massive house in 'Real Street' to transformative,

transcendent and light, moving to 'Luna Street' into a glass house – surrounded by air, bamboo and glass.

But this was not just about the house, but her own reality, focused on what is, shifted to focus on what can be. That is, the house itself was a metaphor for her life. Her approach in her international organisation has also changed, moving from focused on just her own office and division to now attempting to shift the direction of the entire organisation, indeed, even institutional change.

CLA of the Self

Individuals can thus go through the CLA process to find their new narrative and vision. The litany becomes the words we say about ourselves over and over, in our minds and to others. The system is the rules we use to organise identity and expression. This is the map of our mind - do we believe it is neural pathways, or the Freudian id, ego and superego, or the Maslow layers of actualisation, or the Hal and Sidra Stone approach focused on the multiplicity of selves? The worldview is the origin of the issue. This is the historical roots of the issue. At the metaphorical level is 'the story of our life'. Through a questioning process, we can thus use CLA to create a new life story with a new life strategy, if the previous one is no longer seen as functioning or beneficial.

The challenge, as with all foresight work, is to move from fragmentation to the preferred future, the integrated way forward. By identifying the issues (the internal research question) and the double binds that restrict their solutions, individuals create alternative maps of their consciousness and then move toward a new metaphor, a new life narrative, and consequently an alternative future. The questions we use to lead individuals to new transformative narratives are:

1. What are the things I say over and over about the way the external world is? What are the things I say over and over about how I feel about the world?
2. What is disowned in this process, what do I push away, which selves are seen as less important? What external behaviour in others

irritate and upset me? Can this provide insight into the disowned selves?

3. What are the origins of the issue? Are there any trigger events that have created this overarching inner worldview about the ways things are or should be?
4. Is there a core metaphor that describes this situation?
5. What might be a new story, a new metaphor that can reduce or transform the double-bind?
6. How can this new metaphor be supported by behaviour and practice?

These questions thus begin from the litany to the system to the worldview and then to the current metaphor. The new metaphor, then is solidified by a new system and a new litany. It finds support going forward.

In the past five years, I have used the work of the late yogic monk of the Indian social and spiritual organisation Ananda Marga, to explore the role of the post-rational in this process. Dada argued that the new story when it emerges rationally, while useful, does not articulate the deepest part of who we are. And thus, now after creating metaphor, we link it to mantra. The mantra is based on the person's own worldview ie Allah hu or Ya Allah for Muslims, Om for those in the Vedic tradition. Om mani padme hum for Buddhists, and for those who reject these traditions, simply the words, breathe, breathe. In this altered state, I've noticed a new image emerging, leading to a new story. For example, one south Asian woman in an inner CLA workshop focused on the feeling of loneliness: she went from being a lonely tree to a tree in the forest. While this was an important narrative shift in that she was now in a community, the metaphor was still passive. In the meditative state, she suddenly became a butterfly with other butterflies. Strategically, the goal for her would be to seek out situations where she was with others, engaged in activities that involved movement and beauty.

Limits of My Story

Let me conclude by returning to my story. Why is futures studies attractive? There are a number of factors. First, growing up in numerous

countries and civilisations, it became very clear to me that claims for the naturalness of universality were overblown. Nations and civilisations exist in a field – each are in relationship with each other, sometimes violent, exclusive, other times peaceful and inclusive. Each nation and civilisation has in its core text those that it sees as ‘evil’ and outsiders, that it must fight against. It also became clear that the current world system was deeply flawed – the nation-state capitalist system does not work for all. Futures became a way for me to legitimise dreaming of a different world – a possible world, and as we have learned, one of the factors in creating probability is to argue that one’s vision is in fact likely.

And thus phase one was seeding change. Phase two has been growing these young trees, including myself. Phase three has been the forest of futures imaginations, possibilities and strategies. This is expressed in my life in courses, workshops, strategy sessions, books, articles, videos, mentoring. Phase four should be obvious – being part of the process to create a different world – far more equitable, where money is constantly moving, cities are green and smart, governance is truly global, there is gender equity, and the deep culture integrates the material with the spiritual.

All stories have limits? What are the limits to my above narrative?

When discussing my own University of Hawaii professors who deeply influenced me, I know they eventually became Banyan trees, providing support for younger scholars. They are now solid, grounded in the past, providing shade for others, and still growing, branches growing toward the sun. But if they take too much of the earth’s nutrients they will not let others trees grow. The younger trees then need to lift their roots and move, indeed, they need to abandon the ecological metaphor for the story of movement, of migration. They need to become voyagers and create new ecologies of foresight.

While useful as an overall metaphor of the field of Futures Studies, in actual foresight interventions/labs/workshops, the tree is perhaps not the best metaphor. This is because in pedagogical settings, I need to be active, intellectually and emotionally responsive, meeting and anticipating the needs of participants. As well, these workshops are in institutional settings, the castle, if you will. And the question is not just the external arena, the forest, but the role of the futurist, scholar, agent of change within the environment.

In traditional pedagogy, the professor was both the priest (the holder of knowledge) and the knight (the holder of power) ensuring that the best got in, and the dregs were thrown out. Futures work, however, is far more inclusive. Indeed, it requires many intelligences to do well – emotional, spiritual, and intellectual, for example. Also, instead of merely stating reality, futures thinking is about changing thinking, and creating new narratives. It requires participants to leave the castle or cathedral or mosque or temple, using action learning to create new social change movements, or products, or processes. The workshop begins in the castle, but then moves to the nearby fields and markets, and eventually goes to further unknown places. It is the grand voyage to the unknown, to the co-creation of new worlds.

Thus, while the futurist may need to be the knight/priest, other narratives are required that ensure new directions. Certainly, with the advent of the web, ‘the lecture’ the priestly aspect of teaching, if you will, is no longer so important. Long sermons are not needed. Convincing others, while always pivotal, does not occur through life in the castle or monastery, but in the regions that surround. As the noted Indian intellectual Ashis Nandy argued decades ago, it is the shaman who is a far more appropriate analogy for the futurist.

Continuing in this vein, a far more satisfying metaphor is the wizard on top of the castle. In this story, the wizard has access to the knowledge of the priest, the sword of the knight, and has a view of the surrounding areas (the markets) – he or she can help the client, the student, the workshop participant – see far and wide. He or she can help them use their knowledge in dramatically new ways. The wizard understands the rules of the castle (and cathedral and monastery/temple) but seeks to help those within both transform the world they live in (optimise), be ready for disasters (worst case scenario planning, contingency, create new worlds (novelty) and help them find their true vision and their true narrative.

The wizard tells the story of past, present, and future, and helps all move from their current condition to their desired future.

And, this should be obvious, none of this is possible without the support of friends – the witch in the forest, for example, other archetypes – kings and queens, wizards, priests, in other places and other worlds.

And the futurist understands the weaknesses of all narratives, including that of the wizard. He/she uses them, but does his or her best to not use them. The wizard metaphor creates epistemological privilege: the wizard may not be critically self-reflective, who uses normative power inappropriately. The castle narrative creates commoners and those trying to breach the walls. Each story creates new realities and possibilities and disowns others. There are wands to create new realities, but there is no wand to escape dialectics, contradictions, built into all of our stories. Thus I can not conclude with a simple list of things to do or think about. Rather, I can only pass it to you.

I hope you can create a narrative that helps create the futures you desire in the context of the greater we and the challenges we and each one of our many selves face.