

FUTUREtakes

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Our International President Speaks!

Futuring: Preparing for a Changing World

synopsis of the April 2004 WFS Washington DC Chapter dinner program presented by Ed Cornish, president, World Future Society; summarized by Dave Stein and Russ Wooten

The National Capital Region World Future Society (NatCapWFS) was honored to have **Ed Cornish**, founder and then-president of our parent organization, the World Future Society, as our April speaker. An established professional futurist for over 50 years, Mr. Cornish enlightened the attendees with his perspectives on the future and the role that forward-thinking people can play in creating a better tomorrow.

SIX SUPERTRENDS

The program began with a discussion of six supertrends that Mr. Cornish has identified over the years. These supertrends are technological progress, economic growth, improving health, increased mobility, environmental decline, and increased deculturation. Mr. Cornish was quick to point out that even these descriptors are an oversimplification of phenomena that are more complex, notwithstanding the need to identify the simplest elements.

While noting that technological progress has always been an engine of social change throughout history, he also emphasized a profound difference from times past, that the pace of technology growth is explosive – but maybe not quite at the rate predicted by fellow futurist Ray Kurzweil, who has suggested that technology growth in the next 20 years will be as much as that during the past century. Nonetheless, the rapid rate of technology growth is evidenced even in the 20th century, which produced airplanes, atomic weapons, submarines, radar, penicillin, television, and the internet. We can think of technological progress as the growing capability of humans to achieve their purpose

Turning to the economy, Mr. Cornish discussed how people on the whole are becoming wealthier, even though the population is also increasing. While poverty is also increasing, the impoverished people today are less poor than were the poor of earlier times, and the number of super rich people is increasing concurrently. Even the Chinese economy is growing at a rate of ten percent per year. At that rate, their rate of production will double in only ten years. As one might expect, economic polarization into “haves” and “have-nots” is increasing and can be expected to become worse.

A third supertrend, improvements in health, is a result of our technological progress and economic growth. Improved health leads to increasing longevity, which has two very important consequences: population growth and a rise in the average age of the population. These affect future considerations, trends and consequences. This is just one example of how complicated the study of the future is!

For its part, increased mobility impacts not only people but also communications, information, and commercial products. Communications satellites were first envisioned by science fiction writer Arthur Clarke. His discussion of communication with satellites in geostationary orbit dates back to 1945. Mobility, including traveling for pleasure, has some futurists believing that the tourist industry may become the world's biggest industry during the 21st century, if terrorism is controlled. A disadvantage of mobility includes the rapid spread of disease such as with the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) virus.

Environmental decline manifests in many ways including global warming, increased pollution, over fishing, and increasing loss of biodiversity. Mother Earth suffers as environmental decline continues for the world as a whole. Certain nations or locations have made major efforts to reduce pollution and other environmental abuse but more needs to be done.

Then there is increased deculturization. People are losing their traditional cultures, as their ties to the communities and cultures in which they grew up are cut. Mr. Cornish identified increased deculturization as a major contributor to present-day problems between the United States and the Middle East. There are two basic forms of deculturization – culture shock and future shock.

Culture shock can be a group or individual phenomenon. Group occurrences happen when existing cultures are impacted by outside culture moving into an established area and affecting the equilibrium of that area. Individual occurrences are when people relocate into a new area and they are impacted by their inability to function in their new environment. Future shock happens when changes occur from within usually at a very rapid pace. This is generally due to technological improvements though the results of 9-11 could also be considered a future shock phenomenon.

LIFE IN THE YEAR 2040

Looking ahead (as we futurists are prone to do), Mr. Cornish then shared his thoughts on what life might be like in 2040. The six descriptors that he proposed were (1) higher living standards, (2) a more crowded world, (3) an expanded human habitat, (4) increased leisure, (5) more jobs in the service sector, and (6) lifelong education.

In his view, higher living standards will result from the larger number of wealthy people, who will acquire more things and demand more space in which to keep them. At the same time, the improvements in health will lead to a more crowded world through population increase. Perhaps also as a result of overcrowding coupled with technology advances, there will be more human settlements in parts of the world presently deemed uninhabitable or nearly so, including mountains as well as the polar regions. Ski lifts extending up Mt. Everest are not beyond possibility.

In opposition to present observable trends, Mr. Cornish envisions that in 2040, people will work slightly less than they do now. Current trends show that the extra hour or so going to TV. In retirement, some people will retire from everything and choose simply to enjoy themselves. For those in the workforce, a higher percentage of them will be employed in the service sector with a correspondingly lower percentage working on farms and in factories. In the service oriented economy to come, a major challenge will be connecting a person who wants a service with someone who provides it.

Still another characteristic of 2040 will be the need for lifelong continuing education. With the world rapidly changing, skills will become obsolete more quickly, and workers will need to add to their skill sets continually.

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE – FATALISM VS. FUTURISM

Having told the audience his vision of 2040, Mr. Cornish then suggested ways to think about the future. First he admonished that fatalism is fatal. Fatalism, or “que sera sera,” is the mindset of being unable to control the future. In this mindset, people find themselves stymied, in that they feel that they must do something different but don't know how to think about the future. At the same time, fatalism often provides convenient excuses for not changing.

Furthermore, fatalism is supported by three half-truths – that one can't know everything about the future, that one can't do anything about the future, and that one shouldn't worry about the future anyway, as there are too many problems right now. Correcting these half-truths, Mr. Cornish countered that what one can know about the future, even if it is knowable only in probabilistic terms, is important. Likewise, those measures that we can take are important, and nobody can truthfully say that he/she never has time to think about the future, because everyone does. These half-truths, according to Mr. Cornish, need to be fought with the full truths of futurism, in which one accepts responsibility for his/her own future.

FUTURISM AND ITS HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The futurist movement developed largely during the second half of the 20th century. Inspired to a large extent by apprehensions regarding nuclear war the military set up the Rand Corporation to study the future. Herman Kahn's scenario building followed. Olaf Helmer and Norman Dalkey pioneering the development of the Delphi technique. Still other techniques for thinking about the future followed, including trend scanning, environment scanning, gaming, brainstorming, and back casting. To some extent, everyone does these things.

However, in futurism, the goal is foresight, which is the ability to think rationally and intelligently about the future so as to identify which courses of action are right, not only for the short term but also for the long term. A concurrent goal is to help generations of the future to think about their own futures in positive ways.

Q&A

Q. What is the capacity of humans to manage rapid change?

A. First of all, there are factors that mitigate against rapid change such as that predicted by Ray Kurzweil. For example, some people will not want to buy the latest gadgets. People can collectively decide which changes they will accept. They don't have to have cell phones if they don't want them. Also, one way to cope with rapid change is through education.

Q. What are the chances of another Tarrytown conference?

A. It is possible to organize one, but it requires funds.

Q. What will work and charity be like?

A. At the community level, charity is more viable. “We'll take care of those who can't work, and we'll kick out the ones who won't work.” We will not be running out of work, since most of us have needs that aren't being met. However, there will be issues regarding desirable work and what the public is willing to pay for. For example, the Dutch government provides a subsidy to anyone who wants to be an artist. This evokes the question as to whether citizens should have to pay for paintings that nobody wants to look at.

Q. *Three megatrends that you identified rest on the assumption of cheap and plentiful energy.*

A. I am reasonably confident that energy will be reasonably available, and there are a number of technological developments that support this optimism. In fact, the energy problem is due in part to the fact that petroleum is relatively cheap. Otherwise, we would see much more research on alternative energy sources.