

FUTURE*takes*

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From Walt Disney Imagineering!

Storytelling the Future



Synopsis of the June 2006 WFS Washington DC Chapter dinner program presented by Joseph Tankersley of Walt Disney Imagineering; summarized by Lindan Johnson

*“The era we are living in today is a dream of coming true.”
—Walt Disney*

You know the story. A man and his wife take their two daughters to an amusement park and ride the carousel. This story has occurred thousands of times and gone no further. But what if that man were a futurist... a dreamer and knew that dreams really do come true?

As Walt Disney tells the story... he could imagine the horses on the carousel coming to life. Instead of a dingy amusement park in great need of paint and repair he could envision another world filled with color and excitement... a place where the family could go together for entertainment. Children who saw his movies often asked him where Mickey Mouse and Cinderella lived and he seriously considered their questions. He spent another 20 years building his movie business and occasionally jotting down ideas for his theme park. In 1953 when he finally bought the land for his project it was all flat land—no rivers, no mountains, no castles or rocket ships—just orange groves and a few acres of walnut trees. More than 50 years later we all know the story of Disneyland and most of us have taken our own children to ride the rides and visit Mickey Mouse and Cinderella.

Joe Tankersley knows the power of story. He is a senior show writer for Walt Disney Imagineering, a futurist and a storyteller. He explains how Walt Disney saw the connection between entertaining people about the future (Tomorrowland) and being able to make it come true.

“Futurists are storytellers. We are agents of change. We can help people accommodate change through the way we tell our stories... I think it’s critical to remember the important role that fantasy and the imagination play in our world. Futurists are in a field that floats between science and imagination and lately I think we have become overwhelmed with the scientific viewpoint,” said Tankersley.

“Story can offer us a symbolic domain. For example, the maps of the old world were completely inaccurate, but without them the explorers would never have found The New World. Stories help us work

on complexity. Everyone needs to broaden their perspectives and engage in futures thinking. However, as management expert Peter Senge reminds us, ‘People do not focus on the long term because they have to but because they want to...’”

Stories tell us where we came from, where we are going and why. A good story is a great way to engage people. According to Tankersley,

“Stories are what we buy and sell. When you stand at the dairy counter trying to decide which eggs to buy... do you choose the cheapest ones or the brown ones that are personally recommended by the lady at the organic farm?”

We need metaphorical stories that embrace the complexity of our world. Stories go beyond the printed page... paper can hold us back.

Tankersley says that stories are a way to see patterns in the vast amount of information that can otherwise overwhelm us. “Right now... I think we’re in between stories... futurists need to be telling the tales instead of fundamentalists,” said Tankersley, “...we need to trust the power of story... to put ourselves on the line to tell the story. Most people write ‘travelogues’ to take people on a little ‘trip’ but not really invited them to join the adventure.”

Walt Disney said, “People look at you and me to see what they are supposed to be. And, if we don’t disappoint them, maybe, just maybe, they won’t disappoint us.” Tankersley reinforces that belief when he reminds us that stories need a hero and emphatically states that technology is not the hero. We must create characters that people can relate to and then the stories go far beyond the printed page.

Stories tell us where we came from, where we are going and why. Story starts in the “now” in the known and takes you to the unknown-where you would like to be. “Start where you are,” said Joe Tankersley.

“If you can dream it, you can do it. Always remember that this whole thing was started with a dream and a mouse.”– Walt Disney

Joe Tankersley is a storyteller, futurist, and senior show writer for Walt Disney Imagineering.