

**October 2011**

## **Interview with leading futurist Wendell Bell**

*Interview conducted by Art Shostak*

*1) As there is only one graduate program in the USA in futuristics (Peter Bishop's), how can you be optimistic about the near-future of the study of the future in the USA?*

*Wendell Bell:* It may not be quite that sparse. One recent list I read included four primary and fulltime Foresight Graduate Programs in the USA, including Bishop's:

Regent University, School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship. MA in Strategic Foresight, Virginia Beach, VA (Bruce Snyder and Jay Gary).

U. of Advancing Technology, MS in Emerging Technologies, Phoenix, AZ (technology foresight, strategy, and innovation).

U. of Hawaii at Manoa, Dept. of Political Science, MA, PhD in Alternative Futures (Jim Dator).

U. of Houston, College of Technology. MS in Studies of the Future (Technology). (Peter Bishop).

Also, there were 45 Select Secondary Programs listed for the USA, including yours at Drexel University (although I grant many of the others are less relevant to the core of futures studies).

Five were listed as Program Potentials for the USA and six were listed as Undergraduate Centers and Courses, including Linda Groff's courses at Cal State U., Dominguez Hills.

Yet I grant that those numbers don't indicate a thriving core of futures studies at the college and university level in the USA. Moreover, they probably overestimate the number of programs and courses that deal with the central issues of futures studies as represented by our most central professional futures journals and organizations.

At the same time the numbers may underestimate the actual attention given and teaching of futures thinking in American higher education. At Yale, for example, there are people in many different fields from bioethics, law, engineering, and forestry and environmental studies to economics, policy studies, political science, and psychology, among many others, who are concerned professionally with the coming future. But often they do not read nor publish in the major futurist journals.

People within different disciplines and fields mostly seem to approach the study of the future through the central assumptions, concepts, theoretical base, and organization groups of their own fields rather than expanding their horizons and looking at the work of futurists who specialize in the study of the future and who have developed considerable understanding and sophistication about how to think about and explore the future.

Personally, I think people in other disciplines would benefit greatly from searching the futures field. It may be that we futurists will have to spend more of our time and effort publishing in the main disciplinary journals and reaching out to people during annual meetings of the major disciplines.

*2) How might the Academy be drawn to take the study of future(s) more seriously?*

*Bell:* I'm not sure. We face several obstacles. One is that there is a widespread belief among our university colleagues that the future cannot be known. To take a personal example, a urologist came to hear me lecture on the future. Afterward, he came up to me and said something like, "All very interesting, but in the end we can't know the future."

Well, some months earlier I had been in that same doctor's office when he told me that I had prostate cancer. He described several possible treatments with the probable future outcomes of each, and gave his recommendation as to which treatment I ought to pick to have the best future outcome. He told me what he would do for the coming surgery I chose, how long I would probably be in the hospital, and how long it would be before I fully recovered from the treatment.

Apparently, he was unaware that he was claiming to "know" the future—only a small portion of it to be sure. But he was clearly applying his many years of experience with many patients and their treatments and outcomes in the past, to describe the future of this new patient before him.

So in answer to your question, I try to explain to everyone I can that in fact each of us human beings does spend some time engaging in futures thinking, trying to control the future, and to create desirable futures in our work and daily lives. The question is, can we learn to do it better by becoming conscious of the futures thinking that we are doing? I think the answer is definitely yes.

A second obstacle is that there is a great deal of pop futures thinking out there in the real world, often faddishly topical, satirically applied, or ridiculously baseless. It turns some people off to the idea that studying the future can be a serious scholarly or scientific enterprise.

Combating the pop futures world, I try to point out some of the solid work by futurists, but the hot topic of the day keeps changing so fast that it all slips by as sound bites often without much chance for serious discussion.

Thus, my answer isn't very satisfactory. You may have a better one. I just keep trying to plug away, doing the best futures work I can and bringing it to the attention of my colleagues and others when I have an opportunity to do so.

*3) How can minorities, now grievously under-represented in the Futures field (as among attendees at WFS Annual meetings, authors of futures articles or books, etc.) be encouraged to participate and contribute their distinctive ideas?*

*Bell:* That is a great question, Art. What could we do?

How about picking a topic for the next few years for the annual meetings of WFS and WFSF dealing with issues central to the concerns of African Americans, Latinos, or other racial, ethnic, or religious minorities and then sending special invitations to participate to the major university and college centers and departments dealing with such minorities?

Or invite leading scholars and social scientists of minority groups to organize special sessions dealing with their issues? E.g., The Future of Racism in the United States (or Russia, Europe, China, India, etc.). The Future of Discrimination. The Future of Economic and Social Inequality. Race and the Future of the American Criminal Processing System. Gays and Lesbians in 2050.... This is just for starters.

*4) Where around the globe do you see Futures well-developed, and/or rapidly coming of age? Why there, and, what can futurists in the USA “import” in the way of transferable ideas to help the field here?*

*Bell:* Although my experience is limited, I have been especially impressed with the development of futures thinking in higher education in both Taiwan and Finland. Tamkang University in Taiwan is impressive with their futures courses and programs. The founding former President Clement C.P. Chang is himself a futurist and many faculty members teach or have taught futures courses there, including Kuo-Hua Chen and Sohail Inayatullah.

In Finland, Pentti Malaska, Professor Emeritus, Turku University/Turku School of Economics, founded and served as Director of Finland Futures Research Centre and was responsible for many programs, conferences, and courses on futures studies. Anita Rubin, among others, is also at the Finland Futures Research Centre, and there are many other futurists in Finland as well, including Mika Mannermaa.

I’m not sure what we can import—other than more futurists. Perhaps, we need to make some copies of the Jim Dators and Peter Bishops here in the USA

*5) What do you MOST wish futurists understood about the subject that they may not grasp?*

*Bell:* Jim Dator recently raised a question on the World Futures Studies Federation listserv that resonated with me, concerning the fact that some articles accepted by the major futures journals make no reference whatsoever to the futures work of others, including other articles even in the futures journals in which they publish.

I agree with him that this is a problem and we ought to do something about it. If we futurists are ever going to create a canon—a body of key works that we can say constitutes at any given time the core of futures studies—then I believe that we must read, respond to, improve, modify, expand, critique, take off from the works of other futurists.

As you know, it’s hard work. There’s a lot to read and think about—and not all the reading is of equal worth. But I don’t know how else we can create a shared body of knowledge that defines some common ground for futurists. We have made a start on it, of course, but it is a chore that remains less complete than it needs to be to give us the solid foundations on which to move forward. We need to build upon what others have done to the extent to which we can.

*6) What are the major mistakes far too many futurists make – and how might this situation be set right?*

*Bell:* Futurists make far fewer mistakes that most people out there in the world. Every time I attend a futurist meeting or conference, I’m usually the one who gets “set right.”

As a professional group, futurists, like many of our sociology colleagues, are among the most understanding, caring, concerned, kindly, and empathetic people I know. They care about the well-being of other people—both living and still to be born, they care about plants and animals, they care about the health of the planet on which we live and its future. And many of them have dedicated their lives to working for a better future.

7) *What about the planet's next 25 years gives you most hope? Most anxiety?*

*Bell:* Let me try to answer the second question first. What gives me the most anxiety thinking about the next 25 years?

I fear most two things. One involves the consequences of global warming and the growing possibility that heedless human behavior will increasingly make the planet Earth unlivable. We human beings need to act now, cooperatively throughout our planet, to preserve the life-sustaining capacities of our Earth.

The second thing I fear is the breakdown of social order and civil society, especially the spread of violence, war, killing, torture, maiming, and cruel unnecessary deaths. Part of the same pattern is the spread of corruption, lies, deceit, and hate as well as the breakdown of the common decencies of respect and human dignity. And I fear that our own country, the United States, despite its apparent good intentions is aiding these developments with its forcible occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, its treatment of enemy combatants, its surveillance operations, its treatment of immigrants, and its private corporate influences on public policy, to take only a few examples.

What gives me the most hope? The fact that most people most of the time seem to go about their work, contributing to the human community and treating other people with respect and a sense of caring. Whether they are farmers or doctors, truck drivers or cooks, waitresses or teachers, managers or stock clerks—most people show up, do their work, cooperate with others, and enjoy being part of a human group.

Also, taking a worldview, in most countries life expectancies continue to rise. People are living longer and life is the most precious thing that they have. Similarly, the Human Development Index offers some hope for the future. Many countries are doing well and there are many NGOs out there working ceaselessly to decrease poverty, improve health, and increase education for other countries.

Moreover, the international community is increasingly coming together to support shared development goals. Take the United Nations Summit on the Millennium Development Goals that met in September 2010, for example. The goals define the intentions of the international community to eradicate extreme poverty, to achieve universal primary education, to empower women and promote gender equality, to reduce infant mortality rates, to provide universal access to reproductive healthcare, to combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases, to ensure environmental sustainability and reduce the loss of biodiversity, and to provide safe drinking water to people who now do not have it.

It gives me hope that so many people from so many different parts of the world and from so many different societies, cultures, and religions are able to agree to work for such goals that are sure to create a better—and we can hope sustainable—future for humankind.