



CONVERSATIONS ABOUT

OUR FUTURE

CHAPTER

1

BY

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CAN WE PIVOT TO A NEW RENAISSANCE?

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY:

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To move through the door of possibility to a different future as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic we need to imagine complex and guided evolution: humans cooperating with nature, technology, and spirit, writes Sohail Inayatullah.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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While there are many reflections on the implications of COVID-19 and planetary futures, I would like to begin with the door of possibility. Novelist Arundhati Roy wrote in the Financial Times (The Pandemic is a portal, April 4th 2020): ‘Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it’.

Can COVID-19 help us create a new renaissance—a transformation of self and society, home, and planet? There have been two historical renaissances. The Asian Renaissance was personal: the quest for inner peace, enlightenment, the utopia of the mind. The European Renaissance challenged dogma, allowing science and art to flourish, creating the possibility of revolution after revolution against authority that does not serve, the utopia of the material world. But can we integrate the two?

Back in 1978 I remember speaking with one of my professors at the University of Hawaii. When I mentioned my enthusiasm for studying the future, he said, ‘the field is a can of worms’, ‘a waste of time’. The future does not need to be studied as it is stable, he argued. Looking back, it is stunning how wrong he was! Whether the fall of the Berlin Wall, the spread of the Internet, the developing of the human genome project, the rise of China, depopulation in large parts of the world, the global financial crisis, the impacts of climate change, and now COVID-19, it is clear the world has dramatically changed. Indeed, instead of a can of worms, the study of the future is now essential. Are there any weak signals for this latter future, this profound change, or will we return to the pre-COVID world? It is hard to predict. However, there are weak signals, possible pivots to a different world that may develop or disappear, destroyed by a regression to the narrative of blame or inertia.

FROM GDP TO WELLBEING

The first pivot is the shift from GDP to wellbeing. In dozens of workshops around the world what has emerged is the search for a new model of work, accounting, and success. This is a possible

shift from the economy as everything, to models where there is a quadruple bottom line—that of prosperity plus social inclusion plus nature plus spirit or purpose. In a project for the government of New Zealand, we focused on the futures of infrastructure. It was understood that infrastructure would need to be smarter, greener, and more participatory in design, but the meta question was what might infrastructure look like if designed from the principle of wellbeing. The conclusion was that infrastructure would be preventive based and aligned with creating community and social cohesion, not just roads.

But where will the sites of change be? Cities, it seems. Traditionally cities have been focused on short-term planning, expanding roads, and collecting garbage. In several recent projects, what has emerged are discussions on the rise of the ‘anticipatory city’. In this new image of the city, and by using big data, cities become sites where we can anticipate tomorrow’s problems: flooding, psychological depression, the spread of pandemic and, on the positive side, areas of wellbeing, longevity, and indeed even bliss. With big and real time data, public policy shifts to becoming more science-led.

DISTRIBUTED ENERGY SYSTEMS

With prices of solar energy decreasing monthly, another pivot has been the shift to renewable and distributed energy systems. Numerous energy companies we have worked with all imagine a future where their role is not just the supplier of energy per se, but both the connector, ensuring household solar systems are connected to the broader grid, and the energy wizard, providing real time energy information systems. Thus, the new system is decentralised—household self-reliance—nested in a new decentralised but integrated system. The goal is a shift towards full renewables with each person having full data access to energy use, much as we do with our mobile phone plans, knowing the daily gigabyte use and the costs. More imaginative companies envision a world with the ‘genie’ of energy giving citizens real-time energy whenever they need it. More and more, coal mines will become stranded assets.

TOWARDS THE INNER

The final pivot is the continued shift towards the inner. In our scenarios this was the great pause—using restriction as a way



“THE STUDY OF THE FUTURE IS NOW AN ESSENTIAL CAPABILITY”



to become more mindful, enhance quiet time, to go deeper into one's life, moving away from the litany of noise, towards silence. The data is conclusive. Meditation works by first enhancing efficacy, second by increasing efficiency, and third by increasing compassion. And its spread has become easier through new apps that increase accessibility. Indeed, research suggests that through meditation we can train ourselves to be more compassionate towards others. It appears that cultivating compassion and kindness through meditation affects brain regions that can make a person more empathetic to other peoples' mental states, according to researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

CHANGING IMAGE

COVID-19 is a leverage towards possible transformation. It is a move towards a wiser world where wellbeing leads the way. Health is wealth, as the saying goes. To move through the portal to a different future we need to imagine complex and guided evolution: humans cooperating with nature, technology, and spirit. If we don't then instead of a new renaissance, we can easily see a descent into an era of pandemics, climate change, and tribalism.