

Normative Scenarios and Human Freedom: a Conversation with Jay Ogilvy

Richard A Slaughter

Jay Ogilvy is a co-founder and managing director of Global Business Network (GBN). Jay's research and consulting experience revolves around scenario planning and the role human values and changing motivations play in purchasing decisions, telecommunications, health care and education. Jay also heads the development of GBN's Scenario Planning Seminars and he has worked with numerous companies to embed scenario thinking into their planning processes. He has pursued these interests in collaboration with Peter Schwartz since 1979, when he joined SRI, and since 1988 with GBN.

At SRI International Jay split his time between developing future scenarios for strategic planning and serving as director of research for the Values and Lifestyles (VALS) program, a consumer segmentation system used in market research. While at SRI, Jay also authored monographs on social, political and demographic trends affecting the values of American consumers.

Jay's work in futures studies and values research builds on his background as a philosopher. He taught at the University of Texas, Williams College, and for seven years at Yale, where he received his Ph.D. in 1968. He is author of *Living Without a Goal* (Doubleday, Currency, 1995), *Many Dimensional Man* (Oxford University Press, 1977; Harper & Row, 1980); co-author, with Peter Schwartz and Paul Hawken of *Seven Tomorrows* (Bantam, 1980); editor of *Self and the World* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1971; 2nd ed. 1980) and *Revisoning Philosophy* (SUNY Press, 1991). Jay also wrote *Futures Studies and the Human Sciences: the Case for Normative Scenarios* which is, perhaps, the definitive monograph on the relationship of futures studies to developments across the humanities.

This interview was conducted in Sydney during January 1998, while Jay was in Australia for an Australian Business Network (ABN) Learning Scenario Planning Seminar.

Rick Slaughter:
Welcome back to Australia!

Jay Ogilvy:
Thanks very much.

RS
It's good to see you here - you're here for the ABN Scenario Planning seminar.

JO
For one week.

RS
And I understand it's going very well.

JO

I like to think so. I'm excited by what I see.

RS

I would like to begin by reading a quote back to you from your own writing where you said that 'simply to be a human being is to be a futurist of sorts'. What did you mean by that?

JO

It's a way of getting at the importance of human freedom. Spiders build their nests because they are programmed to build nests. We hairless monkeys have a capacity to make up the human game as we go along. We are free and what being free means to me is to have the capacity to frame alternative options and to choose among them. A part of framing those options is in effect developing alternative scenarios at a very primitive level: I could stay home and cook a good dinner tonight or I could go to the movies, which shall it be? If I need to make a choice on a deeper level I could be a butcher, a baker or a candlestick maker, which shall it be? I need to make a choice. So the business of making choices presupposes that there are options. To articulate the options is to look into the future, to enlarge alternative futures and then to choose well among them. So to be a human being is to be free and to be free is to frame alternative futures. So to be a human being is, in that sense, to be a futurist.

RS

In a strong empirical view the future does not exist and has no meaning. But as a domain of human awareness, understanding and action there's clearly more to this dimension than may immediately be obvious.

JO

Sure. If you touch on my background as a philosopher I'll say the future as some sort of substantive thing does not exist. But let's just change the grammar a little bit. Futurity, having a future in front of one, is an aspect of the human condition. So, OK, it doesn't exist like my knee here right now but futurity is real: it's something that colours our existence.

RS

So if it's a domain of human awareness and a principle of present action, then it involves appropriate non-materialist forms of knowledge and action.

JO

Yes.

RS

That's a good point to bring in the fact that you were teaching philosophy at Yale for some years. You had the time - some would say the luxury - to track through a lot of deep literature. What actually took you from that study of ideas and books and philosophy, out of that whole literary world, into this engagement with futures through GBN?

JO

On one level the best answer is: luck. I was not a brilliant strategist who saw this as the only way to go or the best way to go. But on another level there is a real continuity. When I was teaching philosophy my main focus was Hegel. Hegel is the philosopher who really put philosophy into time. It's easy to forget today that for Plato, Aristotle and the ancients time did not have the same familiarity it has for we moderns and post-moderns. Plato said very specifically 'time is the moving image of eternity.' So time is in some sense an illusion. The eternal realm of forms is what is most real. Aristotle claimed that there were a fixed number of species (pre-Darwin) so the very idea of history is a modern invention, a modern discovery, a modern achievement. Prior to Hegel philosophers were after the timeless blueprint in the sky, the eternal truth. Not until Hegel did philosophers really take time seriously.

In ancient Greece people thought in a kind of timeless way. In the Christian era they lived in a world populated by a monotheistic God and the archangels. During the enlightenment there was a battle with superstition and religion; people started thinking differently and living their lives differently. In the 20th Century some of the basic concepts of modernity have been overthrown, for example, the idea that 'we are getting better everyday, every way and progress is guaranteed'. So there really are stages in the development of consciousness. This is the contribution of Hegel and his legacy to philosophy. I count myself as part of that legacy. But when I found myself being backed into the corner of being a 'Hegel specialist' it was a strange irony because he was one of the great generalists. I found it intellectually excruciating and realised I no longer wanted to be a 'Hegel specialist'. I wanted to be doing then what Hegel was doing in 1807 which was seeing how the whole ball of wax fits together: the art, the philosophy, the politics, the economics, seeing how it all coheres and then moves through history. So the work that my colleagues and I are doing now is profoundly Hegelian. If Hegel were alive today he would love to be working at GBN.

RS

So in many ways that work in philosophy really laid the ground work for a career in applied Futures Studies. Futures is also a large scale synthesising and integrating discipline.

JO

Absolutely. It's completely continuous. Sometimes I have to wake up and pinch myself and say how could I have been so lucky to get over the walls of academia out into the real world because very few do that and live. The aspect of it that was lucky for me was publishing a book back in 1975 that happened to fall in the hands of Peter Schwartz, who happened to read it. There I was: a mild-mannered academic sitting in my study one day; the telephone rang and it was Peter who said he wanted to come across the country and talk to me about the book. So he did that and three days later was on my doorstep. We had a wonderful conversation, a wonderful meeting. We talked and talked and talked for an entire weekend and we have been working together ever since. Now if he had never read my book I probably would not be sitting here talking with you today.

RS

Which book was that?

JO

It was called *Many Dimensional Man: decentralising self society and the sacred*. A very difficult book published by Oxford University Press - 70 pages of prickly footnotes and not many people

besides Peter were able to make their way through it. But he read it in one night, called me the next morning and we have been working together ever since.

RS

Where does SRI International fit in?

JO

Well, Peter was working at SRI at the time he discovered my book and we got to know one another. I then travelled from the East coast to the West coast - I thought leaving the academic world just for a year, a kind of sabbatical. But once I arrived in California and started working at SRI with Peter it was just too juicy, too interesting to leave. So one thing led to another, one project led to another and about two and a half years later I looked up, looked over my shoulder and said - 'Gee, what happened to the blue books, what happened to the students, will I ever go back? I concluded well, maybe not; because I found it easier to Hegelianize' in the atmosphere of SRI International and contract research than in the atmosphere of the Academy where one had to specialise - learn more and more about less and less, so you knew everything about nothing. That was not what I wanted to do. I really wanted to see the world whole, see how things fit together and move, and this I find much easier to do in the area of contract research than in the area of academia.

RS

One of the great challenges of our age with the modernist movement, deconstruction and post-modernism is how to still maintain something approximating to a whole view.

JO

Well, you see, I actually think that post-modernism is a synthetic holistic enterprise. The term post-modernism has been popularised in architecture by Charles Jenks. It's been popularised in literature by folks like Stanley Fish. It's been popularised in art by several art critics and literary critics. I think really to get a handle on what post-modernism is really about one needs to see it in its various different disciplines all together. Yes, there is an element of post-modernism that is essentially anti-systematic that says we will have no more master thinkers, no more Hegelian synthesisers. But it takes a fairly broad vision to really appreciate just what is being said there. You have to see a lot to see just how much things are coming apart. So one way I read post-modernism is as if you could do an EEG of Hegel's brain as he was going schizophrenic. It's the Hegelian system going haywire, but the pieces are still there in the 'big bang' of this de-centring movement that is post-modernity.

RS

So we live in a time when there is no over arching story, or metanarrative, and some are working to re-synthesise one that may be more appropriate to our needs than the metanarrative of industrialism.

JO

Right, there is an interesting paradox here. To a certain extent to say there is no metanarrative is to engage in metanarrative. It is a discourse about everything even as you are saying everything doesn't quite make neat sense any more the way a Hegel or Pitirim Sorokin might have said it did. There isn't one story; there are a lot of stories, and they interweave and work at cross purposes and evolve off in different directions. But it is helpful to be sensitive to the range of stories - that's very

much what alternative scenario development is about, as you know. Instead of presuming that we can use some metanarrative to predict a singular future we are now more convinced than ever that to think futuristically, intelligently, you need to be aware of the several stories that can play out, that will play out, simultaneously. So alternative scenarios becomes a post-modern way to think about the future.

RS

It's also an environment in which other voices, voices which may not have been heard in the past, are valued and included in a multi-layered discourse.

JO

Yes, this is one of the aspects of post-modernism. The moderns were proud of themselves. If you look back in the history of philosophy you can find what is often described as 'the battle of the ancients and the moderns'. The moderns were inclined to say there is progress: 'we're getting it right; they had it wrong; let's leave behind those benighted ancients'. Then post-modernism comes along and says well, wait a minute, this singular story of the march of modernity gave us World War I, the Holocaust, World War II the fragmentation of different cultures in the 70s, 80s, 90s. Where is the convergence on the promised land? Indeed if we look backwards perhaps we want to look at some of the indigenous cultures; perhaps we want to look at the native Americans, the Aboriginals in Australia. Perhaps we want to grant that they were not all wrong; that they were sensitive to aspects of human existence that some of us, many of us, have completely lost touch with in our march towards modernity. So the post-modern view isn't simply schizophrenic and crazy. It's the entire history of human consciousness that offers us possibilities for life today, so we shouldn't be quite so quick to dismiss the ancients and the pre-moderns.

RS

Going back to your time at SRI there are at least two publications I am aware of. One was the study *Changing Images of Man* and the other one was *Seven Tomorrows*. In which order did they come?

JO

First was *Changing Images of Man*. It was the first big study I read when I came to SRI. I arrived on a Friday afternoon, came into the office, was given a stack of paper and told 'why don't you read this this weekend?' So I went home that weekend and indeed I did make my way through most of it. It was most impressive. I had nothing to do with the writing of that study. I fiddled with a few footnotes that went into a later edition. But it was a very influential study. Then shortly after I arrived at SRI, Paul Hawkin, Peter Schwartz and I sat down to write *Seven Tomorrows*.

RS

So *Changing Images of Man* was in sense foundational for some of the things that followed. Did it raise some issues about changing paradigms and so forth?

JO

Yes it did. It was particularly influential in leading to the Values and Lifestyles Program (VALS) - a study of American values that was founded by Arnold Mitchell. In California during the 60s and 70s there was a kind of 'thunder clap' of ideas and a sense of possibilities, potentialities. The

human potentials movement was born then. It was a time of immense hope; a sense of tremendous possibility that we could do things better. We could be human beings together in ways that would be genuinely new, genuinely different, genuinely transformative. But exactly how, and how many people thought this way, was unclear.

Part of the origins of the Values and Lifestyles Program was the perception of a kind of East coast - West coast 'paradigm war'. If you started talking to advertising executives in New York City about people driving small cars or eating health food or exercising a lot and you asked them to make products for those people or write ads for them in 1975/77 you would be dismissed, brushed off with the claim - 'oh, that's just 1 or 2% of the population; it's that California yoghurt and wheat germ rubbish'. Well Arnold Mitchell codified a typology of nine different lifestyles, developed a questionnaire of about 30 questions and, with the help of others, created a fairly rigorous algorithm for scoring answers to those questions. Using that system he was able to administer a national probability sample survey from which it became apparent that this 'new values' group that had previously been dismissed just as 'that fringe element in California' actually constituted about 20% of the American population. Now this is not an insignificant number of people; it is not an insignificant number of consumers. So it became possible using the VALS system to ratify, to justify, to endorse a whole new realm of products and services for which there was a market. What I admire, and what Arnold did was, in effect, to make values valuable to the American corporate community; to endorse and ratify a set of values that really saw new possibilities in the human condition, instead of just dismissing that group as loonies. Certainly a large segment of the population was being confirmed by what they would see on the television in ads, products and services that were being developed for that group. A lifestyle was being acknowledged. I thought that was very positive work and it fed into the scenarios.

One of the first big scenario projects that Peter Schwartz led at SRI was a project on the future energy demands for the State of California looking 75 years ahead. Our client, the California Energy Commission, said very explicitly 'we want you to differentiate the scenarios not by virtue of different technologies. We want you to differentiate these scenarios by virtue of the values. So we want to see a scenario that we will call in Amery Lovins' terms a 'hard path' scenario driven by materialistic values and therefore with higher energy needs. And we would also like to see a 'soft path' scenario driven by less materialistic values, an interest in conservation, a scenario that we will need to quantify down to the level of detail of what size refrigerators will people need? What will the energy demands of those smaller refrigerators be? What will it really mean if people say 'no we don't want to commute an hour to work, we want to walk to work or cycle to work?'. Those two scenarios were vastly different in their implications, for example the amount of nuclear power that might be needed, but they were driven by values.

RS

So the link between SRI and the VALS programme into GBN was very much around getting involved in some productive scenario work. So how did GBN take off from that point?

JO

Well GBN was really the result of a number of us concluding that we wanted to do the work we did on our own rather than in a large institution. SRI was a very remarkable place in the 70s and early 80s but once Peter moved on to Royal Dutch Shell in 1981; once Arnold Mitchell sadly died in

1985 and Willis Harman went off to found the Noetics Institute; by 1986 I felt like the last of the Moheicans. Then, when Peter was about to leave Shell because he wanted to come home to the Bay area (a lovely place to live) I did my best to convince him not to get a honest job. He was going to go to work for a big corporation as a planner. I said ‘come on Peter let’s start our own shop’. So then we reached out for a few other good friends, Napier Collyns who had worked at Shell, Stewart Brand who had founded the *Whole Earth Catalogue* and Lawrence Wilkinson, a man we had been working with since about 1980. He was in the TV and film industry and was helping us produce a set of video programmes that never saw the light of day. So there was this team of five of us that knew we wanted to work together. We just set up shop, put out our shingle, and started working on doing scenario planning for a number of corporate clients that we had good contacts with.

RS

Why did you specialise specifically in scenario planning compared with all the other futures methodologies that are available?

JO

Out of a conviction that it was the best tool going. There are other methodologies: technology forecasting, prediction, trend analysis, Delphi polls and so on. But many of them are convergent rather than divergent. They presume to tell you what the future will be. Each of us is fairly convinced that prediction is not possible; that the future is getting weirder year by year (I like to call it ‘global weirding’ instead of global warming) and that prediction will disappoint us every time. That’s one aspect. Methodologically prediction doesn’t work; it’s not possible. The other aspect is the more philosophical, value-laden, part that says the human condition is about making choices among options and there are different options that are genuinely possible. So you can go all the way back to Aristotle. In some ways he said the last word about this. He said that ‘if you can know the future you cannot change it; if you can change it, you cannot know it’. Now that’s very eloquent. I mean, he didn’t put it quite so succinctly. But if you go back to his ethics you will find an argument that essentially makes that point.

RS

I guess I would summarise some of that by saying that it’s logically barred to us to predict the future because if we could do so it would read us out of the historical process as agents.

JO

Yes, precisely.

RS

So there is really no point.

JO

Precisely, exactly. It’s the paradox that you see portrayed in popular movies like *Back to the Future*. If Biff gets to do the things that we don’t want him to do it’s going to change history. So we can’t know a future that we could supposedly change.

RS

You have also said that scenario planning can be described as, I quote, ‘a tool for shaping history’. What did you mean by that?

JO

What I mean is that history doesn’t just happen to us. We are not passive before history the way we are say - before the weather. Storms happen to us. OK, we influence the environment and we may be adding to greater turbulence and ‘global weirding’ and the weather as well. But I really do believe that we human beings need to take greater responsibility for shaping our futures. There are real choices in front of us. I know it is very, very easy for any given individual to say - ‘Oh, history, that’s too big a game for me, there’s nothing I can do’. Alright, OK, as an individual there may not be much that I, Jay Ogilvy, can do. But with a few friends and their friends we can nudge the wheel of history. We cannot control it. We cannot predict it. I was so happy to brush up together with Stewart Brand. I was bowled over the first time I read the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, opened up the first page and saw the sub-text, the epigram that ‘we are as God so we might as well get good at it’. That sounds incredibly pretentious. But on another level it is merely accepting the responsibility that if we dodge it we are shirking our responsibly. You can say of this work, ‘OK it is a megalomaniacal job’ - but someone has to do it.

Part of what appeals to me about multiple scenarios is not as in some utopian theorists like Fourier, Saint Simon or Marx; it’s not as if we are coming along and saying ‘we have got the answer and we are going to present it to others and they better accept our image of some utopia’. Not at all what alternative scenario thinking as a method permits us is to really play the role of servants to many different communities, to elicit the hopes of each community, help that community articulate those hopes and then realise those hopes. In so doing, I honestly believe that different communities will have different hopes. We are not in the business of coming to a corporation or a country and saying ‘we’ve the answer, follow us’. Rather ‘we have got the tool to help you articulate your greatest hopes and implement them’.

RS

So far from being powerless and driven along by a remote historical process what you are saying is that through scenarios, through future studies in general I imagine, people can be symbolically and practically very powerful in a shared and negotiable way.

JO

Absolutely. Another metaphor that has become increasingly powerful for me in recent years is the difference between Freudian psycho-analysis and existential psycho-analysis. Freudian psycho-analysis basically puts you on the couch and gets you to go back to your first three years of life. I know I’m caricaturing; but it tries to find the seeds of your choices today in what happened yesterday. Existential psycho-analysis sits you straight up in the chair and looks you straight in the eye and says ‘OK what do you want? What do you want tomorrow? Where do you want to go? Let’s look at your possibilities’. Now that school of analysis is much more future oriented, but it has the shortcoming that the entire literature is devoted to individuals, to singular personalities. I have been coming to realise that the work we do in facilitating scenario workshops is a kind of existential analysis for institutions, not for individuals. It’s coming to a community, an institution and saying ‘what are your possibilities? Where do you want to go? What futures do you see as preferable, as scary, as avoidable? Where do you as an institution want to go in your future?’

RS

There seems to me that there is a possible danger with a powerful futures methodology like scenario building in people seeing it as too ungrounded and free-floating. Personally I would have thought that the futures methodologies across the spectrum would be stronger if they were seen to be grounded within a futures discourse. Could you comment on that?

JO

Well, to take one very clear example, I think survey research on people's values is a very valuable tool for futures research. In many kinds of survey research there is data about the past and present that can help us ground the potentialities for the future. I think reading history and understanding social dynamics is incredibly important. I think reading science and looking at frontiers of different disciplines asking ourselves 'what is possible in genetic biotechnology? What is possible in material science so that we could build our aeroplanes and build our roads differently? What is possible in energy conservation technology?' You really need to look around and ground futures thinking not just in science fiction or in imagination or in fantasy but in as much hard knowledge in relevant fields as you can lay your hands on.

RS

When I was teaching Masters courses in futures studies at Melbourne University I would get people coming in with no background in futures, immersing themselves in the literature, dialoguing, discussing it, gradually coming to a level of mastery in the discourse and clearly that opening up all kinds of options, ideas, possibilities for them that had not been there before. So it seemed to me that a high quality futures discourse is actually very enabling of people's ability to get into this area.

JO

Absolutely. That is something that, as you know, when I wrote you a letter about after reading an issue of *Futures Research Quarterly* that you edited.¹ That's what I found so inspiring about that issue: clearly here the discipline was being used to give individuals a sense of their own capacity, of their own possibilities. An expression I like is 'to awaken the sleep walkers'. A lot of people march through life right foot in front of left foot, left foot in front of right foot and never really become aware of the choices they have of the options that they could grasp simply because they don't have the skill to frame those options and then the opportunity to choose among them.

RS

I would like to move on to normative scenarios to ask you first of all, what you mean by 'normative' and secondly, why are you interested in scenarios of this kind?

JO

'Normative' is just a two dollar word. But I use it because it has a clear and useful meaning. Contrast normative to descriptive; descriptive being about facts, normative more about values, or norms as ideals. What I'm really looking for here, in order to contrast normative scenarios with merely descriptive scenarios, is that I think a lot of futures work contents itself only with what might happen. What I'm interested in, quite unabashedly, is not only what might happen but what ought to happen. What do we want to happen? Not what ought to happen just in terms of some

heavy handed morality which says ‘I have the tablet of values and I know what everybody ought to be doing everywhere’. Not that kind of ought, but a kind of ought that says some futures are value laden; some futures are preferable to other futures; some futures can inspire our behaviour and performance and we shouldn’t shirk away from developing value-laden futures.

I find it necessary to think about, write about and talk about normative scenarios because the fact is that there is a strong and respectable school of thought in future studies that says ‘we futurists should be humble about injecting our own values into the scenarios that we shape. We should be value-free’. You know, Max Weber the sociologist spoke of the best sociology as being value-free, because, very simply, if you allow your own values to come into the study you will be biased. You will not see things as they are; you will see them as you want them to be. Well, that’s an understandable argument if you are trying to do the science of the way societies have worked, now work. You don’t want to be biased in your observation. You want to be as objective as you can be.

But now when we come to the future it’s a different story It doesn’t exist yet; it has not yet been, and wouldn’t it be nice if we created a future better than the past? Why not? Let’s make a future that is better than the past and present. We all know the dangers of utopianism. We all know the dangers of imaging that: ‘Oh I’ve got the answer, I’ve seen the best future and I’m going to impose it upon you for your own good’. Dangerous - very dangerous. So what I’m interested in, and what alternative scenarios offer us, is an opportunity to pursue a middle road between purely descriptive scenarios of what might be, that are value-free, purely objective and descriptive on one hand, and on the other, an extreme kind of utopianism that says ‘I’ve got the answer; its the best future and I’m going to impose it upon you’. Both of these poles are false. In between, there is a range, a domain, of what I would call normative scenarios, or as I’m titling a book I’m working on, *Better Futures* - not the best future, not value-free futures, but a pluralistic view of better futures, better ways to play the human game. We can make it up as we go along and we can do it better tomorrow than we did yesterday.

RS

You wrote an outstanding essay called *Futures Studies and the Human Sciences: the Case for Normative Scenarios* in which you described how, rather than see futures studies attempt to emulate the sciences, we should see futures studies as already moving in a direction which is reflected in many key developments throughout the humanities.² It seems to me that, without being idly flattering, it’s one of the best papers on futures studies simply because it ties so much together and helps to give us a grounding for moving towards a more defensible, symbolically powerful, notion of futures studies. I wondered whether you had a number of responses? I can imagine on one hand you would get the people like myself who really enjoyed it and found it very productive and, on the other hand, you might get people who said ‘well what’s this all about’? What sort of responses have you had?

JO

There has been a range of responses. I’ve been very gratified at a number of students of futures studies who find it inspiring, and that is the response I like most. There is another group of people who say, ‘Oh my God that was tough slogging - difficult’. It’s got a lot of footnotes and it’s not the most lucid writing in the world. So I’ve got to acknowledge that I need to make it clearer and more accessible. But a third set of responses is the one that bothers me. That is from the folks who say -

‘ugh, this normative scenario stuff it pushes us right back into the old strategic thinking that imagined that we can set our vision and then just figure out how to get from here to there’. One of the advantages, one of the strengths, of one school of scenario planning, particularly followed by the folks at Royal Dutch Shell, was that they tried to be very, very rigorous about saying: ‘in the range of scenarios we develop we’re not interested in optimistic, pessimistic, best case, worst case. We’re looking for different scenarios that differ by their logics, by their underlying structures and we’re going to keep values out of it’. Now they had good reason for doing that. There was good reason to liberate that kind of strategic thinking from a traditional sort of strategic planning that was vision-based. Too often that vision was put up there and pursued without sufficient peripheral vision; without sufficient attention to those forces on the edge of the horizon that could upset the strategic plan. The folks at Shell took that path for very good reasons. But I’ve come to believe that there are even better reasons for saying it’s simply not possible to abstract our values out of our vision. So let’s acknowledge that there are values at play; let’s be self consciously explicit about them and let’s acknowledge that some scenarios are better than other scenarios.

In my view the rigour with which some of the Shell planners pursued objectivity and value-free inquiry may have blinded them to the kinds of values, issues that surrounded for example, the Brent Spar incident where Shell was not sufficiently sensitive to the environmental community when they decided to sink a platform in the North sea. I think it happened again with the assassination of Wiwo in Nigeria. I know a lot of the senior people in Shell and they are good people, right thinking individuals. They are deeply committed to a better world. But when they pursue a scenario methodology that is suppose to be value-free, and when they dismiss this normative scenarios talk, I think it reflects a methodological bias, a methodological choice, which has actually not stood Shell in good stead, which has got them into trouble. So to come all the way back to your question: what have the responses been to that essay? Some enthusiastic, some bewildered, some explicitly critical but from a point of view with which I take issue.

RS

There seems to me to be at least three key sectors for implementing the forward view. One that GBN is most clearly involved with is the business sector. There is an obvious utilisation of scenario techniques in that arena because business needs to know what its future market looks like. It needs to know how to place its product and it needs to be strategic. If we switch the focus to education, education systems tend to be either privately-run systems or government monopolies. They don’t seem to have the same sense of the bottom line or the same sense of strategy or the future as an active principle within the present. What’s your observation about utilising futures thinking in education systems?

JO

There is an immense opportunity, immense. I’ve spent about a third to a half of my time over the last several years working with the National Education Association in the US and various state organisations and local school systems to apply scenario thinking to education planning, educational reform. There is an immense opportunity here. Take 20, 30, 40 members of virtually any community, sit them down for a weekend for a 14, 15, 16 hour workshop and say ‘let’s think about our future and how we might make our future better’. I will guarantee you that if you start with a blank slate program, I will guarantee you that by the end of a two-day workshop one of the things that will be highest on the list of priorities will be the education of their children. The subject

of educational reform and the method of alternative scenarios of futures studies fit hand in glove because it is not rocket science. Who is going to occupy that future? Our children. How can we make that future better for our children and our children better for that future - a better education system. This is an almost unavoidable conclusion when you sit down with any community and talk about its future. So I find the application of scenario thinking to educational reform an opportunity that just cries out to be seized.

RS

I can see that from the point of view of communities dealing with education. In my own Ph.D. I looked at the intrinsic role futures thinking has within any educational process. That argument seems to have been carried. But what I find interesting is that there is no recognition within school systems of the centrality of futures thinking to everything that they do.

JO

Yes. This is an amazing paradox. Those of us who have fought this battle begin to see why it is that there is this blind spot. I think of the old dictum that if all that you have got is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. If all you've got is scholarship, and scholarship is essentially about the past and present, then you're not going to look at the future. I try to apply scholarship to the future. But if you run down to the library and search through the stacks you will not find a single book copyrighted 2005. Therefore, you say, 'oops, well can't do this, better go up and do something that I can do'. It's like the old joke about the drunk looking for his keys under the lamp post even though he lost them down in the dark in the middle of the street, because there is light under the lamp post. Well, traditional scholarship works for the present and past, but it doesn't quite work for the future, therefore we will not apply scholarship to the future. Therefore we will not have departments of futures studies in our institutions of scholarship. You can see the reason, you can see the kind of causal linkages but still it runs you down a blind alley where you don't want to go. We need to think about the future. We need to apply our best intellectual tools for the future, so we have got to overcome this absurd blind spot in our educational institutions.

RS

Would similar comments be appropriate about government's use of futures studies?

JO

That's a different story. There I think it is a matter of the short-sightedness of the electoral process. If you look back historically I think one could make the argument that the public sector was the home of futures thinking back in the 40s, 50s maybe 60s. But by the 70s and 80s the time horizon of large corporations suddenly became longer than the time horizon of government officials because the latter were reduced to worrying about re-election two, three or four years from now, rarely six years. The US Senate has six year terms, you can take a little bit longer time horizon, but the speed up of 'let's throw out the bums from our electoral process' has led to real short-sightedness in government.

RS

It seems to me there is a possible solution, an institutional solution, which would be to create what I call Institutions of Foresight (IOFs) to sit along side of government and to be charged with a responsibility for taking the forward view, the long view. They would be outside the electoral

cycle, outside politics, but charged with reporting to government. Their claim to be heard and taken seriously would rest upon the quality and usefulness of their work. So why aren't there more institutions of foresight to deal this problem?

JO

Well, now we are compounding the errors of government and research institutions. You know the problem: we are trying to get the government off everybody's back, trying to lower government budgets. The criteria for efficacy of governments are becoming more and more stringent and, in the nature of the case, you really cannot prove the worth, the usefulness, of a government futures studies department. You can do it if you take the long view. But in the US, the EPA (Environment Protection Agency) was doing very, very good valuable work for a number of years. Similarly, the OTA (Office of Technology Assessment) was producing fantastic volumes filled with very valuable data about the environment, different technologies and possible environmental impacts. But since long view futures studies cannot prove their worth for another five to ten years, how are you going to justify the budget for the EPA or the OTA in this year's budget cycle? You can't. So you are perpetually vulnerable to the budget cutter's knife because, in the case of futures studies, you will not be able to prove the worth of this year's futures research.

RS

That's all very reasonable but, given a world where the human species has initiated a number of very powerful processes which are obviously longer than electoral or budget cycles, it doesn't reflect too well on our political leaders that they would think that this arena was not worth taking into consideration. After all they too have children and presumably grandchildren.

JO

Yes, I think that's actually the way to appeal to them - through the interests of their own children and grandchildren. There are some foresighted people in politics for example I think. Al Gore has the long view. His book *Earth in the Balance* is an excellent example but I think it is a rare view among our political leaders.³

RS

Would it help for futures studies to have gone further through that process of legitimisation which all subjects, including science, have to go through in their time, and to reach the stage where it's much more widely perceived to be an intellectual and applied discipline, with all of that entails?

JO

It would help immensely; but where is the point of entry? Right now I think it's chiefly through business schools. With business schools you can see the path of legitimacy. Business schools have experts in strategic planning. Scenario planning has become a legitimate branch of strategic planning. Business people are not just about knowing; they are about doing. If you are going to do something it is going to have consequences that are successful or unsuccessful in the future. So this is where I see the best point of entry for futures studies into our universities.

RS

Jay, I would like to finish off with some summary comments from you about your book *Living without a Goal*. I was reading through your paper (on normative scenarios) that we referred to

earlier, where you were talking about the way that the material economy was disappearing to be substituted rather by a kind of immaterial information economy. A phrase you used that caught my attention was what you call 'a process of sublimation ...' that '... generates meaning where there was none'. It seemed to me to be a key to understanding your book *Living without a Goal* more deeply. Could you comment on that?

JO

I like the question. You've drilled down to a sentence that I perhaps did not find as much meaning in it as you have. So let me back up for a moment and talk about sublimation; what the medievals called 'sublimato.' I'm not just talking about Freudian cold showers. What the medievals meant by sublimato in alchemy was the transformation from solid to gas, doing a kind of end run around the liquid phase. You cooked the philosophers' stone and it gave off vapours. That was the process of sublimato which was a kind of metaphor for going from base materials, the base aspect of human existence, to the more lofty ones.

Now there is another aspect, another cut on sublimation that Freud missed. Freud was very much the materialist, he was very much the mechanist, he used hydraulic metaphors. If you pushed down instinct here it would push up somewhere else; it was like so much plumbing. In this materialistic metaphor there is a constant conservation of mass and energy; a view that basically you cannot get more out of less. What I've tried to do in *Living without a Goal* is suggest that with the dematerialisation of the economy we leave that zero-sum situation. We leave that zero-sum reasoning: if I win you lose; if you win I lose. We enter a realm where you actually can get more out of less, where you actually can take the same material basis and reinterpret it time and time and time again. One instance of this is humour, a joke. In their structure almost all jokes are a kind of double entendre: they are taking one 'sign design' and interpreting it in two, three different ways. So this is an example of where you actually get more out of less.

Now we are not going to leave the material economy behind. You can't eat bits or bytes. We've got to eat, we've got to be clothed, we've got to have shelter. But just as the agricultural economy is assuming a smaller and smaller percentage of the total economy and a smaller percentage of the total work force (down from 45% of American workers in the middle of the 19th Century to about 3% of American workers today) so, likewise, the industrial economy, the metal bending, the economy of molecules is assuming a smaller and smaller percentage of the gross domestic product economically, and a smaller and smaller percentage of the work force. What is left? Well, some call it a service economy, and we can also refer to it as an information economy. What I find really hopeful is that this information economy is not a zero-sum economy. It's not a win/lose economy. I sell you a cow, you have the cow, I now longer have the cow. I sell you information, you have the information, I still have the information. There is a potential here for a law of increasing returns.

The economics of information are very strange. There are different examples: a treasure map. If I let you see my treasure map it loses value for me because now you can find the treasure and I may lose it. But there are other examples that operate very, very differently. A language, a fashion, a fad, these things, the wider it's spread the more valuable it is. A communication system, a telecommunication system. We see network economics where the value of the network increases as the square of the nodes of the people connected to it. This is a law of increasing returns that we are beginning to see in different aspects of our information economy. I find this hopeful because it can

get us away from the economics of scarcity, of need, of want, of win/lose to an economics of positive returns of win/win of getting more out of less. So that's what I mean by the sublimato, a sublimation of the economy.

RS

Jay, if I could finally summarise a couple of the ideas that come out of this discussion and your writing. One is the notion that 'Earth might be fair'. It is actually a possibility and if we collectively get our act together we can go for it. The other is your phrase that we might generate meaning where there was none. I find that a useful way to re-frame the futures studies area which, to empiricist eyes, seems merely a vague and empty space. When you get right into futures in the quality ways: through language, symbols, techniques, collective action, collective work of many kinds, it seems to me that the whole arena is generating meaning, generating options and choices where perhaps there were none.

JO

I appreciate you reminding me of a link that I should have made before. Sublimato and meaning making: give credit where credit is due. It's easy to trash people who are popular, but I don't like to do that. Peters and Waterman wrote a book *In Search for Excellence*, and it was very popular. The very best thing in that book, and it was really a wonderful move, was where they said the job of the manager today is making meaning for the employees. So I really do think that we can use alternative scenarios, and that kind of futures thinking, as a way of helping people to come to work in the morning with a sense that what they are doing can make a difference for the better; that they are not just coming to work to make a buck; that they are coming to work to make a better world, a better future. That is a much better way to come to work, a much better way to get out of bed in the morning. It gives you a sense of enthusiasm, energy, vigour that too many people lack. They just don't get the opportunity to have that kind of sense of meaning in their lives. But the opportunity to make that kind of meaning is an opportunity many managers have. In order to actually grasp that opportunity I think there is hardly a better tool than the framing of alternative scenarios and the process of choosing among them.

RS

So that's a journey out of history and technology through information to making meaning, to seeing the future as an arena of great human and organisational significance.

JO

Yes, and human freedom. Another way to see it is that too much of our existence is drudge work. More of it could be playful. More of it could be fun, more of it could be enjoyable. There is joy to be had. This takes us all the way back to the beginning of our conversation and the early years at SRI, the 60s. I haven't altogether forgotten what that time was about. There was a time when a lot more of us had a lot more fun and we have forgotten some of that.

But I think it is still there in our future to be grasped.

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Notes

1. R. Slaughter (ed), Futures Studies and Higher Education, Special issue of *Futures Research Quarterly*, Vol 8, No 4, Winter 1992.
2. Jay Ogilvy, Futures Studies and the Human Sciences: the Case for Normative Scenarios, in R. Slaughter (ed), *New Thinking for a New Millennium*, Routledge, London, 1996, pages 26-83.
3. A. Gore, *Earth in the Balance*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 1992.