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## Futures

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## Trajectories

## Responding to a planetary emergency

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This short essay provides an overview of, and rationale for, a program of scanning, research and writing that led to the publication of a new book on the global predicament – *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History* [1].<sup>1</sup> It asks why the futures field has been so apparently ineffective in helping to avoid a new default future of ‘overshoot and collapse.’ It also suggests that, while there are indeed many ways forward, broadly speaking humanity remains asleep to its predicament.

The title and theme of this work emerged over a period of several years. I settled on this formulation because, rather than viewing the planetary emergency in merely fatalistic or downbeat terms, I wondered if I could re-frame it in a more positive light. Like most others who’ve been paying attention, I acknowledge the seriousness of our situation that could bring civilisation to its knees in a shockingly brief time. Given our careless uses of the environment and our penchant for ignoring planetary limits that, certainly, is the diminished future toward which many heavy trends are currently pointing (see below). Some are even claiming that it is already ‘too late.’

Yet, as has been known for some time, ‘trend is not destiny.’ With our in-built capacities for foresight, forward thinking, anticipation and choice, I believe there’s still time to come to grips with our predicament and to change direction. The future is not set in stone. We are perhaps the only animals that can comprehend emerging situations clearly enough to make decisions about how our everyday *modus operandi* affects our collective prospects for good or ill. The big question seems to be ‘can we change course in time?’ There’s plenty of evidence to support both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers.

As I discovered during my research, this fact provides a vital clue. While many specialists continue to pursue largely technical visions of the future and many others remain entranced by the latest technological wonders – currently the emergence of iPads, 3D televisions and the like – it seems clear that the keys to our future lie elsewhere. Yet, as I reviewed a broad range of hard copy and on-line material, I found remarkably few pointers to that widely overlooked territory.

*The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History* is an attempt to apply what I’ve learned over some three decades of futures and foresight work. It was ironic, therefore, that I had to set aside most of the futures literature in order to scan more widely than ever before. As a result the book makes reference to many different fields of enquiry. Key questions that arose were: how can multiple contributions fit together within a coherent whole? Also, how can various different kinds of truth be honoured and adjudicated? There’s never likely to be answers to such questions that will satisfy everyone. Pluralism reigns. The culture wars continue – between different cultural spheres, nations, groups and individuals. Nor will the postmodern tendency to critique everything subside overnight. Complexity, pluralism and difference are here to stay. That said, a method that can handle such challenges is a vital part of any credible attempt to respond to a world in deep crisis. I’ve found an Integral perspective useful here as it is perhaps most able to provide a panoramic and in-depth view of the human and civilisational prospects before us. As a perspective and method it is dynamic and hence constantly evolving. To the extent the present work succeeds, it is to no little extent a result of the power, depth and inclusiveness that an Integral perspective offers [2].

Standing behind the familiar surfaces of everyday life – our family, our work, the travel we undertake, our preferred recreation and so on – a single question confronts us all, rich and poor, in every country in the world – how should we respond to a world slipping deeper into crisis each and every year? It’s a question that considerable numbers of people are more or less aware of and to which there are at least two fundamental responses that can be labeled ‘passive’ or ‘active.’ Perhaps the former is most common and is often expressed through familiar strategies of denial and/or avoidance. Here the issues appear so challenging, so difficult to understand and respond to, that they are simply set aside. This allows many

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<sup>1</sup> The book was published by Foresight International in hard copy and on-line after commercial publishers passed. A second, revised, edition is being considered.

people to get on with the kinds of close-up and personal things they *can* have some influence upon. The clear drawback of such responses is that they lead to widespread disillusion and disempowerment. This is not really surprising as it's an established fact that denial and avoidance don't really work at any level. All they do is to defer issues, to shove them aside for a while. This leads me to speculate that the repressed knowledge of this failure to confront reality may be among the root causes of the 'depression epidemic' noted in recent years.

Active responses are clearly different and hold much greater potential. They involve a willingness to learn, to take on board new and sometimes disturbing ideas and, at some point, to engage in some sort of personal project or action. What is often at stake here is *the very sense of self* that is responding. The book suggests that this is indeed one of the key domains that offer answers to our collective dilemma. Some responses are active but not particularly effective. Opinions differ here but one could include in this category minor changes in lifestyles such as purchasing a more fuel-efficient car, installing solar panels or composting food scraps for a garden. Beyond these are responses that are not restricted to individuals but become more widely influential, that involve real structural changes in how things are done or that initiate new or renewed ways of knowing and being. To some social innovators and related pioneers this is not news. Yet in considering the wide array of responses to the planetary emergency a couple of things stand out. First, those actively involved are still very much part of a minority that is either ignored or lampooned by the mainstream, especially big business and mainstream media. Second, as we've seen with attempts to reign in global warming and CO<sub>2</sub> increase, there's insufficient broad agreement and shared understanding about what the priority tasks are and how to go about them.<sup>2</sup>

The book has two main purposes. The first, which is tackled in Part One, is to describe 'the problem' as clearly as possible. If we know what that is and can articulate it without exaggeration or distortion it then we have at least made a start. In considering this material it seems to me that an attitude of open and non-judgemental receptiveness is useful. While knowledge advances and details change the underlying trends are unmistakable and unambiguous. For example a 2009 study headed by John Rockstrom of the Stockholm Environment Institute concluded that humanity had already crossed three Earth boundaries that were better not crossed: climate change, reduction in species diversity and an out-of-kilter nitrogen cycle. It also reported that we're on track to exceed four more by mid-century: ozone depletion, fresh water usage, ocean acidification and land use changes [3].<sup>3</sup> While some of the material covered in Part One is challenging and may at times weigh heavily on the spirit, I thought it essential to set the scene as unambiguously as possible.

Part Two is very different and seeks to break new ground. It attempts to re-frame conventional thinking about 'world problems' while, at the same time, honouring and evaluating some of the many contributions that have been put forward to resolve it. It's here that the positive implications of the book begin to emerge and where the grounds of new hope and new or renewed human capacities arise. The process is quite straightforward. As we allow ourselves to open to the 'signals' that are being constantly generated within the global system, as we become aware of their import and actively respond to them, then a deeper, richer, understanding emerges. Then, out of that understanding new and renewed values, motivations and capacities can also emerge. That's part of the 'good news' that arises from a clear understanding of the human prospect before us. We also have what might be called a powerful beginning advantage familiar to futurists and foresight practitioners – the near-term future is by no means the 'unknown territory' it is often taken to be. Yet there remains cause for concern about the present spread of energy and effort within the futures arena.

As is widely known, the practice of futures scanning developed rapidly during the early-to-mid 20th century under the impacts of war and threat of war. They gave rise to new professions that included planners, strategists and futurists – now better known as foresight practitioners. Over a few decades the toolkit developed and diversified [4]. By the early 21st century these efforts had become widespread. Government departments, local authorities and corporations adapted and used them for their own purposes – which usually meant applying them to questions about technology, the economy and commerce. A 2008 survey provided some fascinating insights into the spread of this work [5]. Very briefly, it suggested that *the bulk of futures work occurs in places that are strongly identified with the status quo and that more recent and perhaps more innovative uses remain rare*. The continued evolution and development of the field appears problematic because, while large numbers of partly-trained 'scenario technicians' can be found nearly everywhere, the demand for advanced futures work remains episodic at best. This is partly due to the way that governments and commercial organisations define their requirements to suit their own specific values, worldviews and interests. It is also due to the near-universal rush of universities toward market-led applications and hence a diminished capacity for paradigm breaking and innovative work beyond the market. Abstracts written for the 2011 Istanbul Futures and Foresight conference provide an up-to-date sample of this pattern [6].

It is for such reasons that the futures field *per se* remains a minor player in the expanding global drama, many of its practitioners attuned to earlier concerns. It remains too small and undeveloped to take the lead in responding to growing international challenges. Instead, the best work continues to emerge from other sources – men, women, research teams and groups who have started to read the 'signals,' or indicators of change, around them, have understood their implications and

<sup>2</sup> This has been tragically demonstrated in the context of the present Australian government's attempts to place a price on carbon. The opposition to this one measure has been so extreme, nasty and diversionary that it is genuinely difficult to imagine how a raft of other measures in pursuit of e.g. a 'steady state economy' could be envisaged or undertaken.

<sup>3</sup> While early mid 20th century work was characterised by quantitative forecasting, modelling and trend analysis these were later balanced by 'softer' qualitative methods such as visioning and scenarios, and 'broader' ones such as strategic planning and social foresight.

reached clear – often startling – conclusions. As a result a new wave of futures-related work has emerged and it is to this wider context, with its ever-growing literature and web presence that *The Biggest Wake-Up Call* is in large measure indebted. As noted above, it is also indebted to the rise of the Integral perspective that has arguably brought new clarity and depth to these concerns. These rich materials provide us with a variety of resources and insights for negotiating the unprecedented period of upheaval and structural change that lies ahead. There is, however, one central certainty in all the confusion – the human race is challenged as never before to wean itself away from the growth dynamic to which it is currently addicted.

Someone once said that looking to growth to provide social wellbeing was like expecting cancer to support human health. Continuing old-style growth basically tears up what might called 'natural capital' and transforms it into short-term goods and services, many of which we don't need anyway. Or it accumulates abstract value in remote data stores of unreal 'bubble money' that is purely symbolic. Part of the problem is that to recognise how dysfunctional growth has become is simply too challenging for those whose wealth, income, social standing and personal identity are all tied up with and dependent upon the earlier system. So I want to acknowledge that waking up to this aspect of our predicament can be shocking and painful. Yet there are huge benefits to be derived from doing just that. Gaining greater clarity about our real situation means we can stop being passive and begin dealing with it. It means that we can be more honest with ourselves, our families, our colleagues and the less well off. To know that you and yours are heading for a global train wreck of huge proportions means that you have a chance to either avoid it or at the very least minimise some of the more obvious impacts (such as shortages of food and fuel).

Hence the title of the book reflects the uncomfortable reality that that the culmination of all that we know constitutes 'the greatest wake-up call in history.' Will the futures field rise to the challenge? Perhaps. What is increasingly clear, however, is that 'the future' is no longer the province of specialists. Rather, it has become – or very soon will be – the 'core business' of everyone and of all human societies. Which in turn may herald some long-awaited shifts in perception, policy and practice. That is also why this book is not primarily intended for specialists in futures or Integral theory but for 'general readers' who are alert to changes in their world.

Although many will continue to deny it the evidence is clear that we are already right in the middle of a planetary emergency with no simple solutions, no easy exits. It is not merely an economic or financial crisis but a systemic one that is simultaneously global and also reaches into the deepest recesses of individual lives. *The only way forward that makes sense is to seek clarity on what we are facing and mobilise on a society-wide and global scale to deal with it.* Anything less will consign our children to a diminished and unliveable world. One of the strategies that has been suggested is that we move to an immediate 'war footing,' but it's by no means clear that near-future dangers have anything like the same impact or perceived significance for currently affluent populations as those that pose more immediate threats to them (such as economic and financial instability). Many current impacts tend, in fact, to be felt by those whose plight is largely overlooked and distorted by poverty and distance [7]. The fact remains, however, that we have precious little time to act if we're to avoid the worst outcomes – a world unfit for life, including humans, and unable either to sustain civilisation or the rich ecology upon which it has always depended and always will. Perhaps the best, and certainly one of the most succinct, descriptions of our situation, was offered by biologist E.O. Wilson when he suggested that:

We have entered the Century of the Environment, in which the immediate future is usefully conceived as a bottleneck. Science and technology, combined with a lack of self-understanding and a Paleolithic obstinacy, brought us to where we are today. Now science and technology, combined with foresight and moral courage, must see us through the bottleneck and out [8].

'Science and technology + foresight + moral courage' is not a bad beginning formula for approaching what may be the most monumental task ever faced by human beings – the need to revision, revise and reconstruct the fundamentals of our lives on a newly equitable and sustainable basis. As the book makes clear Wilson's suggestion recognises several key domains that are seldom accorded 'equal treatment,' yet each of which has an essential role to play. The search for clarity requires that we stay alert to ways that different kinds of knowledge illuminate different aspects of the context and contribute to a broader and more systematic picture.

The notion of 'waking up' is obviously a metaphor that, like most others, can be twisted, abused and misapplied. Being aware of this I've tried to make it abundantly clear that the author is not, in any way, claiming to be more 'awake' than anyone else. A moment's reflection will indicate that the insights presented in the book emerge from countless sources in many cultures and are by no means attributable to any one individual.<sup>4</sup> The limitations of metaphor notwithstanding, the benefits of 'waking up' to the civilisational challenge are, I believe, highly significant.

It's not possible to expect that the human species can avoid the costs of past mistakes, oversights and missed opportunities. On the other hand, I reject the view that our children and theirs are necessarily condemned to fall all the way to the depths of a new dark age within a ruined and debased world. How far we do descend, and in what manner, are perhaps the central issues and trade-offs of our time.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Including Ken Wilber!

<sup>5</sup> The shift from 'overshoot and collapse' to some sort of 'controlled descent' from the peak of industrial cornucopianism is one of the key shifts considered here.

Early and effective action will certainly moderate the process. Late and ineffective action will exacerbate it. The act of faith and belief inherent in this work is that humanity still has time to rise to the occasion and take the opportunity offered to re-negotiate the terms of its tenancy on, and relationship with, this small and fragile world that we call home.

Whether it will actually do so or not is another question entirely.

## References

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- [3] J. Rockstrom, A safe operating space for humanity, *Nature* 461 ((September) 24) (2009) 472–476, available from: <<http://www.anu.edu.au/climatechange/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/472-475planetaryboundaries.pdf>> (accessed 29.10.09).
- [4] R. Slaughter, From forecasting and scenarios to social construction, *Foresight* 4 (4) (2002) 26–31.
- [5] R. Slaughter, The state of play in the futures field: a metascanning overview, *Foresight* 11 (5) (2009) 6–20 (summarises this project and some of its key implications).
- [6] See M. Oner, S. Beser, O. Saritas, *Book of Abstracts, YIRCoF '11*, Yeditepe International Research Conference on Foresight and Futures, Istanbul, August (2011) 24–26.
- [7] S. Faris, *Forecast: the consequences of climate change from the Amazon to the Arctic*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2009, provides a number of well described examples of early impacts on the already disadvantaged.
- [8] E.O. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, Abacus, New York, 2002, p. 23.