

## **Hitting the snooze button on the future: review of *The Biggest Wake up Call in History***

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Futurist Richard Slaughter has never shied away from engaging tough and critical issues. And over his career, the issues have been getting tougher and more critical – perhaps reaching a zenith with *The Biggest Wake up Call in History*. In this work he tackles what he – and many others – see as an impending civilizational disaster that requires urgent action, yet most people are either unaware or unconcerned about it. The book is organising simply and effectively around two purposes. The first part details the problem and the second suggests solutions. He critically reviews works of leading proponents of the impending disaster school to make the case for the problem. It usefully brings together many different voices and perspectives, and makes it clear that he is not a lone futurist voice in the wilderness. In fact he argues that futurists have been all too quiet on this issue. The essence of his solution is the need to reframe conventional thinking.

Since introducing the integral futures notion with “Transcending Flatland” in 1998, his work has been informed by this perspective and lens, becoming more comfortable and adept with it over time. Some may find it a bit of a force-fit at times, that is, there may be other ways to come to similar conclusions, but that does not detract from the usefulness for his work and the others who are using it. In this book it provides the perspective and framework from which to frame and respond to the wakeup call.

This is a provocative work that pulls no punches. Slaughter believes strongly in urgency of the impending disaster and has little patience for those who do not see the situation the same way. Those who agree are the awake, and those who do not are not. This is a tough position but one could argue that a healthy futures ecosystem ought to be able to handle such strong normative viewpoints. And certainly, even if one ultimately does not share the sense of urgency, the argument presented is sure to make one at least pause. Put simply, “we are in fact already right in the middle of a planetary emergency with no simple solutions, no easy exits.” The outcome if nothing is done “will consign our children to a diminished and unlivable world. Humanity has collectively outgrown its world and is exerting a range of impacts on it that are progressively reducing its capacity to sustain the wide variety of life it once possesses.” And if you are not alarmed yet, “we have precious little time to act to avoid the worst outcomes.” Strong stuff! In a nutshell, we are fouling our own nest. He collects and synthesises an overview of accounts of human-induced ecological damage, and supports these with an account of the related social, cultural, and economic factors. Futurists will likely be familiar with the issues, but may nonetheless find this compilation compelling (I did). If you are feeling that perhaps they have been overly complacent about these challenges, this work will splash some cold water in your face.

To the author’s credit, even though he is making some strong statements – one might say accusations – he does not get overly emotional nor wag fingers about it. Readers judging themselves unawake will not feel scolded and preached at. For instance, Slaughter asks, “whose fault” and responds “no-one’s and everyone’s.” He understands how humanity has reached this point, and rather than laying blame, seeks to understand and find ways to address it. The problem is analysed for the purposes of understanding and moving to solution space.

Some may find a bit of anti-technology slant. For instance, Slaughter suggests that new forms of communication have undermined face-to-face communications. While the

technology can have that effect, perhaps a stronger one is that it stimulates the desire for more face-to-face communication. I recall as a child that my social circle was largely limited to kids on the block, but my children and so many others have a much richer and wider range of friends, many of whom they will seek out later in life. Regardless, it is clear that he believes technology will not save us, and that this belief in a technological fix contributes to keeping us asleep. Put directly, “there’s simply no prospect of resolving the situation by any technical fix whatsoever.” This echoes a similar point made by the *Limits to Growth* folks in their 1972 original work and their 20- and 30-year update. Their work was criticised for overlooking the role of technology, which they directly addressed and reached the same conclusion as Slaughter does. Indeed he includes the “Limits” work as part of framing the problem.

This point is an important one. It is fair to say that the prevailing belief is that there are technological solutions that will come to the rescue. If you believe Slaughter and the works he cites, however, it will not happen. Rather, the solution lies in addressing cultural and individual beliefs. In other words, we have to change our collective minds about what is happening, recognize the challenge, and mobilise appropriately, or better yet, integrally, looking for solutions that address the individual values and behavior, cultural viewpoints, and the physical and social infrastructure.

Serious work is called for. Slaughter cautions us not to be lulled into complacency by existing social innovations. He suggests that even well respected efforts such as the Brundtland Commission and the reports from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are “convenient fictions adopted largely to pacify public opinion.” They have done little to slow economic growth and its associated impacts. Again, more strong stuff! He is not optimistic about the prospects for the large-scale social change that he believes is necessary. He suspects that it will require a major disruption to get the attention required to contemplate the necessary structural changes.

He includes a nice table that charts “60 years of insight into the global system” that highlights the works that have warned about the civilisational disaster. This is a terrifically handy compilation that readers will likely be citing down the road. Included are major works, such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, Paul Ehrlich’s *Population Bomb*, E.O. Wilson’s *The Future of Life*, and Jared Diamond’s *Collapse*. He makes the point that it is not as if we weren’t warned.

He devotes a whole chapter to the phenomenon of overshoot and collapse popularised by the “Limits” series, noting that the problem comes from delays in feedback. When the feedback does come, it is too late to effectively act. What is needed is social foresight. While he concludes that overshoot and collapse is a structural reality, there are still opportunities for intervention.

He suggests that the notion of descent could be a more positive narrative than collapse. The reasoning is that talking of collapse leads people to tune out, and reframing as descent not only may keep people’s attention, it is also a more accurate description of what happens.

By descent, he notes that the fall of the Roman Empire, for example, was not sudden, but rather gradual and discontinuous. Similarly, the decline of industrial civilisation is not likely to involve a sudden and final crash. And “we can still influence it to minimise the chances of reaching the worst outcomes.” It is somewhat chilling to note that good news that in contrast to notions of abrupt collapse, we have “a descent trajectory could resemble that of a very uneven ladder with alternating periods of turbulence and relative stability. During each of these we could regroup, recover, and perhaps moderate

the process.”

He cites Las Vegas and Dubai as extreme examples of hyper-development – “the last great statements of the hyper-growth era.” They are examples of a misguided worldview. He notes that “human beings equipped with powerful (albeit fossil-fueled) technology may have temporarily suspended various environmental limits and conditions, but they have very clearly not suspended the laws of physics.” This is a key point. In our course on Social Change at the University of Houston, the “idea of progress” is identified as a dominant view of social change in westernised societies. The sense is that progress is inevitable and continuous. But when taking the long-term historical view, it is clear that fossil fuels have ignited a terrific boom. “Progress” assumes that a sufficient substitute will come along. But what if it does not? Rather than banking on this development, Slaughter suggests that a reduction in demand is a more promising route to follow.

He devotes a chapter to the metaphor of a shadow economy, based on the psychological concept that individuals often project parts of themselves they dislike onto others. He suggests societies do much the same. We repress aspects of the social situation we would rather not face. One is organised crime. The other, perhaps of greater interest, is what he calls the “fantasy economy.” As money has gone virtual, “the amount of abstract trading has far exceeded the value of real trade”, leading to “ethically bankrupt financial speculation still taking place and continuing to exert real-world costs and penalties.” He cites the work of futurist Hazel Henderson in tracking and exposing these practices. And he notes the connection of the addiction to growth and accompanying draining of natural resources. It is a systemic problem.

In sum, the problem lies within us. We focus on the externals, but it is really the internal human intangibles – the perceptions, motivations, values, and worldviews that are at the root of the problem.

The second part of the book searches for solutions. Since the problem comes from us, so must the solution, in the form of changing our values and worldviews. Some of my own research into this realm suggests a ray of hope. Values and worldviews are indeed shifting away from the materialist emphasis at the core of the growth imperative that in turn is driving the civilisational challenge. The big question is whether these shifts will happen in time. The tough news here is that values change very slowly, as has been documented by Professor Ronald Inglehart and colleagues at the World Values Survey. The potential is there, but it may take the “disruptive event” suggested earlier to catalyse this change to a critical mass.

Slaughter uses the integral perspective to explore the worldviews and as a framework for analysing 14 works on climate change, noting what portion of the integral framework that they speak from.

He notes that ten of the 14 works emphasise the cultural and social system perspective, and suggests that “further work on climate change and related issues needs to pay as much attention to interior worlds and external actions of individuals as it does to their collective equivalents.” In other words, most works are addressing the challenge at the systems level, and not paying enough attention to the motivations and values of individuals. He suggests the emergence of social foresight as a mechanism to promote the development of skills in reading the signals of change and thus contributing to a greater awareness of the civilisational challenge. He traces this emergence in five stages of development, each building on the previous:

1. The simple unreflective use of social foresight in daily life.
2. The use of futures concepts and ideas.
3. The use of futures tools and methodologies.
4. Foresight processes, projects, and structures.
5. Finally, the social capacity foresight emerges in which long-term thinking becomes a social norm.

Most would probably agree that the leading edge in societies today is stage four. He reviews a series of seven proposed transition strategies, including Jorgen Randers' (one of the *Limits to Growth* authors) One Degree War Plan, which seeks a more aggressive target of 350 ppm concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> than the currently proposed 450 ppm. This would reduce temperature rise by one degree and almost halve anticipated sea level rise. Slaughter sees here, as with the review of climate change, that the role of "human identity, purpose and motivation" is overlooked. Several conclusions emerge from the review:

- shifts away from passive consumerism;
- reductions in energy consumption across the board;
- re-localisations, especially in relation to food production;
- the pursuit of strategies to increase resilience;
- restoration of the natural environment; and
- the need to wean societies away from their addiction to economic growth.

Again, my client work suggests such notions are not totally alien to the multinational sector that is targeted as a chief culprit. Futurists have been bringing such notions to their attention for years. Slaughter might argue that such efforts, introduced within the current "consumption" paradigm, are marginal or even misguided. He may be right. On the other hand, to introduce these notions in a more alarmist fashion would likely be off-putting to clients. Bad news is not popular in these circles and will not get much, if any, hearing. Thus, the conundrum: does one introduce aspects of the civilisational disaster in "palatable" form or take a stronger position that tells the bald truth. I say emphatically "both!"

Futurists should also be interested in Slaughter's advocacy for the integral framework as a means for devising more comprehensive and holistic solutions. He suggests that the integral framework leads to translation and transformation are two key approaches for waking people up. Translation suggests finding out where people are at and devising messages that appeal to them. Transformation, moving people to higher levels of development, is useful in that at these higher levels, the message of the urgency of the civilisational challenge becomes obvious. He notes that some may object to the transformation message, which bluntly suggests that "we have the truth" and need to pass it on to those who lack it. But he suggests that the urgency of the problem requires bold action that must get past such sensitivities. The challenge is whether transformation can happen fast enough and at a large enough scale to be impactful. Most of the values shifts in place are still not reaching high enough levels to be effective – Slaughter, referring to Don Beck and his Spiral Dynamics work, suggests the really significant changes happen at the 2nd tier of worldviews. Alas, perhaps 2 percent of the population is at this level today (and that may be optimistic).

Some may question why an integral framework is needed to reach the fairly obvious conclusion that one should tailor messaging to appeal to different worldviews. Insights can be reached by other means, but does that detract from integral? I don't think so. Slaughter himself notes that "the Integral Vision certainly does not appeal to everyone [...] and it should not be reified." Clearly, he has found an approach that feels brings his

work the next stage of its development, and if it produces products such as *The Biggest Wake up Call in History*, then the futurist and global community should consider ourselves grateful beneficiaries.

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