



# ADVENTURES IN THE FUTURE

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Back awhile, I wrote a white paper for AAI Foresight, "[Foresight as an Outsider Activity](#)" (Foresight Report, Spring 2021), which addressed how a consulting futurist, as an outsider, might enhance the acceptance of foresight by a wider audience.

After completing that paper, I wondered whether a more personal piece might be useful (if only to me) about my own travels through the foresight realm and about what struck me as important and compelling. In fact, this is not as ego-centered as it might appear, as I am often asked questions like How did you begin studying foresight? What is useful to a practitioner of future studies? and What have you learned from it?

## *Coming To the Future*

My awareness of the study of the future and of the World Future Society (WFS) as an organization came about through serendipity. I was acquainted with John Gerba, who was serving as the chair of the First General Assembly, held in Washington, D.C., in 1970, at which I volunteered. And what an eye-opening experience that was! The media coverage was robust, as *Future Shock* was just out and author Alvin Toffler was speaking.

At that time, WFS had nearly 3,000 members from almost 80 countries. That first conference, held at the Washington Hilton, gave its presenters the opportunity to speak not just to conference attendees and the world at large, but also to one another on a very wide range of subjects. In doing that, they were creating interdisciplinary and cooperative endeavors across governments, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations, and more. A common goal at that initial conference was problem solving, even for problems that had not yet arisen. It was heady stuff indeed.

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### About the Author

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My field boss at the conference was Sally Cornish, wife of WFS founder Ed Cornish. Sally had me going in six directions at once, like playing an intricate 3D chess game. At the after-conference party, I met people who were to become decades-long acquaintances and colleagues. One who immediately comes to mind was Joe Coates, then with the National Science Foundation, who stopped me in the hall at John Gerba's condo (John was the party host) and said, "I don't recognize you, why are you here?" This set the tone for the next 40 years of our relationship, with him challenging me to explain myself and then pointing out where I was wrong.

I need to emphasize here that one compelling element of my growing interest in studying the future was WFS itself. Sally Cornish was the heart and soul and Ed was its mind. The organization at that time ran almost entirely on volunteer assistance, and it was Sally who recruited, managed, and encouraged this dedicated force of true believers. As the fortunes and resources of developing WFS increased with its growing membership, the Society was able to hire an expanding staff of writers, editors, and logistics specialists, as it moved toward holding an annual conference and expanding its publications.

An anecdote from that staff after-party illustrates Sally and Ed's personal contrasts. A group of us were sitting on the floor, kicking around "deep thoughts," when Sally noticed us and was immediately on the floor with the "young folks." Ed soon became aware of this and said, "Sally, I believe it is time for us to go home," in a disapproving voice. While Sally was an organizational cheerleader, Ed, from the get-go, projected the persona of a dour clergyman.

But what was clear was his strong belief in the study of the future. His personal goal in founding the organization was to generate an international dialogue in response to the Cold War and the potential of World War III. He felt (and rightly, I still believe) that better understanding among nations, organizations, and individuals could make a difference in helping to shape a safer and more peaceful future.

While I was not always able to directly participate in the growth and development of WFS in its early years because of the distractions of the Vietnam War and then law school, I kept connected by writing



*Tim Mack (center) shares a light moment at WorldFuture 2002 conference with Joe Coates (left) and Arthur Shostak, another early member and supporter of World Future Society.*

*Photo by C. G. Wagner*

articles and helping out where I could at conferences. Unfortunately, I missed the huge (4,500 attendees) Toronto conference in 1980, held in two hotels, with Timothy Leary as a major media draw.

I ultimately moved to Washington to take a job with the National Academy of Sciences and got reacquainted with WFS. Once again, it was Sally Cornish who hooked me up with Ken Hunter, who was running the 1982 General Assembly. He asked me to join his planning team, which both chose speakers and scheduled the sessions. Soon after the conference was over, Ken (who was a senior manager at the General Accounting Office) asked me and a couple of other '82 conference volunteers to join a GAO project to assess and recommend improvements to the federal budgeting system, which would be run directly under the Comptroller General.

In other words, the GAO project was not only assessing the present condition of this system, but also assisting in shaping its future. Having worked after law school for the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, I found this to be the ideal opportunity to work with a broad, interdisciplinary approach similar to that favored in the foresight field. And our extensive GAO report is still used as a guidebook by the federal government.

What became increasingly clear to me was that the foresight community served a great number of people, including myself, as an intentional community of significant resources and potential opportunities. The field of foresight seemed to be a match to my own eclectic background and range of interests. Prior to my law degree, I had been a welder, a grain elevator worker, a tour guide for the Seattle Underground, a fry cook, a carpenter, a bus-line ticket agent, and a floor manager at a design center. And that was before graduating from college.

The Vietnam War provided a further bump in the road, and by the time I started law school I was in my mid 20s. While in law school, I worked for a legal clinic, a children's defense fund (mostly law of education work), and a nonprofit advocating for children with disabilities (under PL94-142—Education for all Handicapped Children Act). Again, foresight was one of the few fields that was broad enough to encompass my growing range of interests.

To expand a bit on this theme, it seems appropriate to note that my family of origin was a bit nontraditional. Not in a bohemian sense, but more like the Depression-era mind set emphasizing independence and self-determination. My father never made it beyond 10th grade—he'd had to quit high school to feed his brothers and sisters and got a job in a textile factory when his father died. My mother served as a newspaper editor and retail manager during World War II but was soon replaced when the men came back from the war. But these setbacks did not keep them from meeting the goals they had set for themselves.

Accordingly, the family focus was on individual initiative and personal choice. My college major was Philosophy, which I took to mean learning how to think (I loved Phenomenology) and spreading my range of interest as wide as possible, including Existentialism and Chinese Cultural History.

In addition to being widely inclusive, the futures field proved to be a very optimistic discipline. While some areas of foresight did focus on disaster recognition and preparedness, others were of a more normative bent—that is, looking at where we want to go and how to get there. Prior to taking the reins at WFS, I had been an editor at *Futures Research Quarterly* and then editor in chief at *World Future Review* (which incorporated aspects of both FRQ and *Future Survey*). One qualification that helped me get those jobs was serving in law school as editor in chief of the *Syracuse Journal of International Law and Commerce*.



*Mack displays WFS periodicals, two of which, FRQ and FS, were later to merge as World Future Review.*

The foresight field offered a range of opportunities to write and publish, including articles on government policy, communications technology, education strategies, environmental sensing, the federal budget process, training and career development, biotechnology, future of leisure, electronic marketing, and grassroots politics.

All this in turn led me to join a range of relevant interest groups, including the US Association of the Club of Rome, the MIT Enterprise Forum (advisers to entrepreneurial high-tech businesses), the Issue Management Association, the Converging Technologies Bar Association, and the Association of Professional Futurists. As well, I was a member of the bar associations of New York, the District of Columbia, and the state of Washington.

However, this view of what might be called “birds of a feather” life patterns overlooks a more essential fact. The study of foresight led me to conclude that, across the wide range of “silos”—defined spheres of interest—there needed to be more interactive dynamics going on. In other words, changes in one sphere, like government, cascaded interactively into others, like the private sector or science and technology. And this opportunity was offered by working with those engaged in the study of the future.

## *What Was Useful to Me*

As I got more involved in the range of related areas of the law, which was my first professional training (if you don't count philosophy—which many don't), I began to see how they worked together (or did not) and wanted to know more. And so, after working in criminal justice as a defense attorney and in administrative practice such as regulatory work, I began to seek a better understanding of how the laws I was required to deal with were created and for what reasons. This led first to a couple of years with the U.S. General Accounting Office, which was the analytical arm of Congress, and then more specifically with colleagues at the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, the Congressional Research Service, and the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future.

I should initially make it clear that the last three organizations were not my direct employers, but rather collegial enterprises connected to the World Future Society through mutual interest and cross membership. And I believe that network building has been one of the strongest aspects of foresight—that is, the field usually operates as a collaborative versus a competitive dynamic, thus allowing bridge building between economic sectors and even nation-states.

As I mentioned previously, the World Future Society counted as its members individuals and organizations from over 80 countries around the world. WFS worked in cooperation with groups such as The Millennium Project (with its web of international nodes) and the World Futures Studies Federation, which arose out of a global network of academic institutions.

What has also occurred over the past couple of decades has been the growth of interest among nongovernmental organizations in foresight, evidenced by expanded collaborative relationships with NGOs and a parallel development of foresight capabilities in quasi-governmental groups, such as the United Nations, the European Union, and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

As the president of WFS (2004–2014), I had the honor to speak to and work collaboratively on foresight-related projects at several of these



*When Ed Cornish (left) stepped down as founding president of the World Future Society in 2004, Tim Mack became only the second president of the 38-year-old organization, serving 10 years.*

organizations, as well as the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (where I had formerly been employed as a research associate), Turkish National Television, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

As I recount this professional history, it becomes evident to me that each new shift in professional alliances and responsibilities built onto this vision of interconnection that had guided my working life. One yet unmentioned area was the five years I previously spent as a vice president with WPP Ltd., a UK-based firm, which at one point was the largest business communications corporation in the world.

It was during my time at WPP that I become more aware of the impact of the private sector on international and national governmental policy directions (and vice versa) and how NGOs also participated in the dance between public problem-solving and private-sector initiatives.

Once again, it appears in retrospect that I ended up where I needed to be at a time when I was developing questions about how the world worked in some new arena. While this, again, might sound like serendipity, it was almost always the case that answers to my questions soon became evident. Although the full definition of *serendipity* is “the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way,” the story of “The Three Princes of Serendip” actually focuses on being prepared for opportunities that may arise—and then taking advantage of them when possible.

I see a strong parallel here between that attitude and approach and the foresight tools of trend analysis, option identification, and impact assessment. A word relevant to the story of those princes is *sagacity*, defined as “showing keen mental discernment and good judgment, or shrewd.” Accordingly, the process of determining the results of various courses of action and cross-impacts has proven to be an auspicious approach to decision making.

Foresight as a consultative discipline is often limited by confidentiality and nondisclosure agreements, while writing books and articles (like this one) is a road to sharing one’s ideas more broadly. But a meeting of the minds is always essential for successful and mutually productive enterprises. I mentioned Joe Coates earlier in this article, who was well known for his brutalist approach to advising clients. To illustrate, there is his often-told story about a Midwest U.S. corporation where he met with the Board Chair for dinner on the evening before his consultation. At the end of the meal, the chair advised Joe that his services would not be needed the following day (and even Joe could not say what it was that he said that led to that rather surprising outcome).

Advising private-sector clients often involves factors that governments, NGOs, and issue groups do not see as critical. One is the contractual agreement that “what is said here stays

here” (aka the nondisclosure agreement). Only a few times in my experience has the corporate culture been sufficiently divergent from my own belief systems (my biases, I guess I could say), and those divergences involved corporate management or environmental policy (the former involving the gender, race, or geographic diversity of leadership), and only one led to the actual suspension of a contract.

However, believing in one’s competence in the dance of the future appears to lead to a belief that some practices which lead to internal discord ought to be carefully avoided, even if the financial cost turns out to be significant. When I was working in the private sector, it became evident that some practices on both sides of the consulting relationship were less than savory. A senior manager in one company was unwise (or unwary) enough to say to a national news magazine’s reporter that clients came to his firm for help because they were “too scared, or stupid to handle it themselves” and could afford their services. As you can imagine, that did not go down well with clients. That same firm’s ethics policy was that the “Ethics Committee met on all contracts paying below one million dollars” (and they prided themselves on “billing 28 hours each day”).

On the foresight side, I cannot say that we were “without sin,” but client–futurist relationships were a good deal more pleasant. One of my favorites was a pro bono presentation to the Cub Scouts—to their membership, not their leadership. As one might imagine, this required some rather careful thought, due to the age of those members (from 8 to 11 years) and their well-known limited attention span.

I presented a short “Flash Gordon” vision of tomorrow and why it looked like a lot of fun, and then provided crayons and big sheets of butcher paper to show their parents and one another what the future was going to look like. A half-hour later, those kids were still going strong (I kept copies of those visions in crayon), and parents came up to me afterwards to say that their own son had never concentrated on anything for more than a few minutes—except for baseball. So it was hard not to think of that as a success.

My experience at the other end of the education spectrum, at the postsecondary level, was equally illuminating. A presentation on education research trends to graduate students in Florida led to little interpersonal discussion, but interaction was surprising at a Teachers University in the People’s Republic of China. While all these college students were formally studying to be teachers, many ideally wanted to work in media, music, or other glamorous and well-paid professions. But it was unclear with what successes—and what disappointments—these Chinese students might face if they left their approved career path.

And that offers a segue into another area of reminiscence, that of the interpersonal and cultural. I have already mentioned that a Yale architect named John Gerba offered me the



opportunity to volunteer at the first WFS general assembly and that Sally Cornish continued my WFS connection until her untimely death. And Joe Coates became a colleague and adviser for the remainder of my professional life. (I retired and left the East Coast prior to his death.) But these strong connections were enriched by many, many more across our member and client countries and a wide range of speaking engagements—relationships made and strengthened over time.

As a result of those connections, I was able to travel worldwide for more than three decades, especially during my time as WFS President. Foremost among these overseas relationships was one with South Korea, which led to meeting and interacting with such groups as the Korean National Academy, the Korean Ministry of Science, the Korean Communications Commission, the Seoul Broadcasting System, the World City Water Forum in Incheon, the World Ocean Forum in Busan, and a range of Korean universities.

While it is personally pleasant to reminisce about past enjoyable professional experiences, I also want to point out that it was a mutual concern and interest in options for the future that brought me back to South Korea so many times (so often, in fact, that I obtained a commercial visa to allow trips on short notice). Foresight was a doorway to a range of groups and interests that would not have been possible otherwise. This was especially true of an unusually future-centric country like South Korea, where many of these speaking engagements were for opening or closing conference plenaries.

Another country with a robust interest in the future was Mexico. A strong WFS chapter in Mexico City led to conference appearances in Querétaro with the then-national president (and his formidable army bodyguard with 50-caliber machine guns)—who had previously come to the United States to speak with WFS—and a lecture series on education at the Monterrey Institute of Technology Guadalajara campus and at similar events in the countries of Brazil, Uruguay, and Jamaica. Again, the point here is that, while some countries show a thoughtful interest in what the future holds for them, many more do not.

The conclusion of this reminiscence of my professional life “in the future” is a mixed one. Attempts to tell others about what I did professionally have resulted in a range of responses: admiration, bewilderment, or even occasionally scorn (as if I had confessed to being a carnival fortuneteller). Although the good parts of it were very good, it gradually became clear that there were not nearly as many job opportunities in the field as one might have hoped, either as permanent staff or as an outside consultant. But the chance to meet like-minded colleagues and travel were invaluable, and I would not have missed that for the world.

## *What I Learned*

At a presentation in Singapore over a decade ago, I was asked to outline the ways in which foresight projects could fail—or at least run into the tall grass. This was an appropriate assignment for me, as much of my earlier work—at the Kennedy School, at the National Academy of Sciences, and at the General Accounting Office (now known as the Government Accountability Office)—was focused on postmortems (what went wrong and why in public-policy initiatives). This little-used tactic brings to mind the description of problematic policy makers who are “Not always right but never in doubt,” and the “over the cliff” results that can occur.

Similarly, I recall that Joe Coates once put together a two-part program for the Small Business Administration, with the initial one-day presentation followed by a second five years later. Several of the initial presenters were able to then candidly assess where they were right and where not, and why that may have happened. That proved very useful.



*The author, 2007.*

In closing, I would like to refer to a few areas that continue to be of interest to me personally but that also continue to loom as needing more thought for future foresight work:

- the interactivity and cross impacts of forces (trends) and the range of surprising outcomes that arise as a result;
- the challenge of capturing weak signals through the participation of a range of observers, representing a wide variety of viewpoints, sectors, and interests, in combination with reviewers who then shape that input into robust factors; and
- the search for viable and accepted measures of trends and change drivers—what they are, how they work, what they mean, how they interact, and whether those measures are persistent or transient.

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