WHAT FUTURE GENERATIONS NEED FROM US

Allen Tough

What do future generations need from us? Various procedures, including individual and group role playing at 13 locations in nine countries, can help us answer this question. In general, future generations need equal opportunity (a legacy as beneficial as ours was), our caring about their well-being, and attention to their needs in our legislatures and parliaments. Their particular needs are for us to focus on peace and security, the environment, the worst risks of all, governance, the knowledge base, children and learning. The needs of future generations may provide the centrepiece for a new global ethic that improves our prospects for a positive future.

If we could see humanity many decades from now, we would see people of all ages playing, working, talking, building, learning, laughing, crying, loving. We call these people 'future generations'. This is not some abstract and meaningless concept: at any given time in the future, actual people will actually exist. They will be living busy lives on earth or elsewhere in our galaxy, not just in someone's imagination.

If these people of the future could speak to us in order to influence our perceptions, values and actions, what would they say? What do they need from us?

Why clarify their needs?

A clear understanding of the needs of future generations can provide a highly valuable perspective. First, it can be useful for all of us in our personal decision making and in enhancing our meaning and purpose in life. Second, it is a particularly valuable perspective for futurists, planners and politicians when setting their agenda and deciding strategies for dealing with today's complex issues. Third, in all significant policy making and legislation, we need someone to speak for future generations (and for the planet); a clear and empathic understanding of their needs will be a highly useful foundation for a designated spokesperson.

Future generations are unable to lobby or vote today. To ameliorate this situa-

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tion, several recent proposals suggest new ways of incorporating the views and needs of future generations into legislative and policy-making processes. Let us briefly note 11 of these proposals.

The Council for Posterity declares that the rights of future generations should be 'represented by a competent advocate in any present-day tribunal or assembly that is deciding courses of action that might have harmful long-term consequences'.1 A bill of rights for future generations, circulated worldwide by the Cousteau Society, urges governments and organizations 'to implement these principles, as if in the very presence of those future generations whose rights we seek to establish and perpetuate'.2 In addition, 'ombudsmen for future generations could serve as watchdogs to alert international, regional, national, and local communities to problems affecting future generations. They could supply decision makers with appropriate information for formulating policies'.3 A new organization could monitor implementation of a world ethic that emphasizes living sustainably because of our responsibilities towards future generations. With a role analogous to that of Amnesty International in defending human rights, it would highlight serious breaches of the world ethic.4 Along the same line, an international tribunal on crimes against future humanity could hear cases against any government or significant organization that threatens the well-being of future generations.5

Several proposals apply specifically to the USA, but alternative versions might also be implemented elsewhere. A House of Spokespersons for the Future could be a third house of Congress; though being without the power to pass laws, it could meet three times a year to evaluate bills before Congress and to suggest new legislation.6 A Court of Generations could 'judge threats to the security of the blessings of liberty to our posterity', echoing a phrase in the preamble of the American Constitution, 'WE THE PEOPLE of the United States, in Order to . . . secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity'.7 A think tank and a Department of Consequences, with a cabinet-ranked secretary, could prepare scenarios on the long-range effects of major policy initiatives.8 A Secretary for Future Generations could sit in the President's cabinet.9 A fourth branch of state government could be responsible for declaring certain acts of the other three branches as 'unfuturistic'.10

Experimenting with various models, it would be useful to incorporate a spokesperson for future generations into the decision-making processes of the United Nations and its agencies, other international agencies, non-governmental organizations, each religion, various levels of government, and all other organizations.11 Indeed, all of us could serve as spokespersons and guardians for the needs of future generations, looking out for their interests as much as possible.12 Having this perspective adopted by all participants in public and corporate decision making should probably be our long-term aim.

In order to experiment with any of these proposals, we must grasp the perspective and probable needs of the next few generations. Just what do they need from us? In our policy and legislative processes, what position do future generations want their designated spokesperson to take?

Until now, remarkably little effort has gone into answering these two questions. Despite a careful scanning of the potentially relevant literature, I have not found any other thoughtful effort at spelling out a detailed message to us from future generations. Such a message can provide a useful foundation for any policymaking and legislative experiments that incorporate a designated spokesperson for future generations. It can also be useful for each of us individually as we make decisions in our lives and as we seek meaning and purpose.

Procedures

At the present time, we cannot actually receive a message from future generations. We therefore have to develop other procedures to figure out their needs and priorities. This article combines several procedures, including traditional academic procedures and two forms of role playing.

The usual academic procedures included searching the literature, reading, thinking and circulating early drafts for criticism. Networking in order to obtain information not yet in print was another traditional procedure. My networking efforts included conferences, telephone calls, correspondence and e-mail. Particularly relevant was the 1992 international conference¹³ in Malta sponsored by the Global Network on Responsibilities Towards Future Generations and Their Environment.

In order to gain as accurate a picture as possible of the needs of future generations, it seems highly useful for us to use thoughtful, creative role playing or mock meetings. Individuals and groups can imagine themselves in some future era, several decades from now, and can then role play people of that era composing a thoughtful message to send back to the people and governments of the 1990s.14 For this article, two different forms of role playing were used.

The first form was my own individual role playing. Early in the project, to immerse myself in the subject matter and to generate some preliminary ideas, I created in my imagination five people alive several decades from now on four continents. I then held and tape-recorded two lengthy mock meetings at which these five people discussed the messages that they wanted to send back to us. Obviously I cannot make any claim for the accuracy or representativeness of this procedure since I played all five roles myself. The procedure did turn out to be extremely useful, however, as my own experiential introduction to the needs of future generations. Also, I was surprised to discover that the views arose remarkably spontaneously within each of the five roles. These views seemed much more authentic, empathic and insightful than I had anticipated—not particularly confined by my own worldview. I urge critics and sceptics to try this procedure for themselves: they, too, might be surprised!

The other form of role playing was conducted by students in various parts of the world. They played the role of people who will be alive several decades from now. I sent invitations to 28 professors, asking them to arrange for one of their classes to put themselves in the shoes of people living several decades from now and to represent their interests. My letter asked what message or key recommendations these people in the future wanted to send back to the people and governments of the 1990s. Much to my surprise, this invitation evoked enthusiastic responses from professors and students in nine countries around the world. I was moved and encouraged by the thoughtful and insightful messages. They were composed by students in 13 locations: Australia (both Brisbane and Melbourne), Canada, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Thailand and the USA (Florida, Hawaii, North Carolina and Texas). 15 Their fields of study included futures studies, business, philosophy and communications. Their current educational levels ranged from high school students to postgraduate students. Some responses were written by individual students whereas other messages were composed by small groups or the entire class, often during a mock council meeting held several decades into the future.

What do future generations need from us? Combining the results of several

procedures is far more likely to produce a useful answer than relying on a single procedure. To develop a message to us from future generations, I therefore used not only the usual academic procedures but also two forms of role playing. These various procedures produced a rich array of ideas, priorities, formats and messages. Carefully considering the entire array, I selected and integrated the key points into a single cohesive message. I assume that a single integrated message will be far more useful than reproducing portions of the futures literature, the individual student responses and the class responses. Since this message is a blend or synthesis of ideas from so many sources (individuals, groups, books, papers), it is not feasible to credit each point in the message to one particular source.

Let us turn now to the integrated message itself—the actual message that future generations might send back to us if they were able to do so. If we asked them to tell us about their needs, priorities and requests, what would they say to us? Here is the reply that we might receive.

The message from future generations

Cordial greetings from the people of the future! We represent your grandchildren's generation, and the world of their grandchildren as well. We are delighted that you, the people of the 1990s, are willing to listen to us, at least for a few minutes.

Please take our needs as seriously as you take your own. Please care about our well-being as much as your own. This is our central plea to you.

In your major decisions and actions, please consider our perspective and welfare along with your own. Our needs and rights are not inferior to yours: please regard your generation and ours as equals. You might call this principle intergenerational equity—equal opportunity across the generations. Even though we live in an era that is very different from yours, we too are people, vigorously engaged in a wide variety of activities and projects, just as you are. We sometimes feel frustrated and angry with you for taking such enormous risks and for treating us in such thoughtless, uncaring, selfish, unfair ways. We want to have opportunities and resources that are equal to yours. As you make choices in the face of competing voices and demands, please shift towards a fair and appropriate balance between your well-being and ours. We appreciate the efforts that you have already made but we also note that even deeper and faster changes are required.

We hope that you feel deeply connected to the ongoing flourishing of human culture and the planet over the next few decades. Feel genuinely committed to this as one of your highest values. Perhaps even put continued flourishing at the centre of a new global ethic. Examine your personal values: is anything truly more important to you than the ongoing flow of human culture, the continuing flourishing of human civilization? If this is one of your central values, the key needs of future generations become part of your own self-interest rather than something separate or opposing. Efforts towards something transcendent, something bigger and longer-term than everyday life, can provide meaning and purpose to a whole society as well as to individuals.

Humanity plays a significant part in cosmic evolution: we are the local manifestation of life in the cosmos. Our role at this stage is to advance our understanding, culture and harmonious functioning to its maximum potential. The grand perspective of cosmic evolution and our own long-term future can provide people with meaning, purpose, awe, wonder, and the ultimate adventure of contributing to cultural evolution. If humanity's continued well-being becomes your supreme

value, your highest priority, the centre of your religions and ethics, then there is a good chance that you will make the required changes.

We hope that those of you who are religious will think for a moment about the creator's purposes. Surely the point of creating life in the universe was for it to develop to its maximum positive potential. Surely the deity or supreme being (whether called God, Yahweh, Allah, Brahma or some other name) wants our culture and our planet to survive and flourish for many more centuries rather than deteriorate miserably.

You must realize just how deep and pervasive your changes must be in order to give us equal opportunities. Individual behaviour, social and economic structures, even paradigms and worldviews must all change. If you do not change vigorously and successfully, we will be much worse off than you are. If you continue your short-sighted selfishness, the consequences will be catastrophic, perhaps even beyond the stretch of your imagination. We desperately want you to understand what your present behaviour is going to cost us who are alive several decades later, even if your behaviour improves to the extent that you now consider practical, feasible and realistic. You may see the required changes as unrealistic, as not feasible, but how realistic and feasible is it to expect us to feed two or even three times as many people as you feed? How realistic is it to believe that your arsenal of nuclear and biological weapons will never be used during the long period between your era and ours? If you truly care about the well-being of future generations, you will find a way to make the required changes. You are already making rapid progress in some spheres, and are clearly capable of making the other required changes if you choose to.

We urge you to celebrate your unique place in human history. The people in your decade face the historic challenge of making the shift from a narrow, selfcentred, short-term focus to a long-term global focus that takes into account our needs as well as your own. If you do take vigorous action to achieve deep longlasting changes, your actions will earn a permanent name for the decade of the 1990s—the Great Transformation Decade. You will be remembered as the people who saved human civilization and its planet from catastrophe and disintegration, simultaneously building a foundation for a more positive world.

On a more personal level, we hope you will feel caring, love, and even a spiritual connection towards those of us who are members of future generations. We hope each of you will get in touch with your inner dream—your altruistic and ethical desire to make a positive difference to the world—and let yourself take the risk of striving for that dream. Never give up your search for personal contributions that you can make, your search for a path towards a positive future. Feel empowered and vigorous rather than discouraged, disheartened, despairing, dispirited. Look for like-minded people and form a bond with them. Yes, you live in a difficult and dangerous decade, but all successful social transitions feel difficult and dangerous at certain stages. You know what you have to do and you are capable of doing it if you choose to. Yes, passing successfully through your current stage will require new ways of thinking and being. But you have the needed courage and ability.

Now let us shift to seven specific priorities and recommendations, seven spheres in which your improvements could have major benefits for us (and for you, too). These seven core recommendations emerged from our intensive thought and extensive discussion. We appreciate your willingness to consider them seriously.

All seven are intricately connected, of course, but it is useful to focus on each of them separately as well. We have avoided suggesting implementation details for these broad priorities: since you are closer to the situation than we are, you are in a better position to plan specific strategies and projects.

- (1) Peace and security. We will all be much safer if you eliminate most of your nuclear and biological weapons, and any other weapons capable of destroying human civilization. Please reduce warfare and civil unrest by fostering non-military methods and institutions for dealing with disputes (and with greed, ambition, anger and revenge), by fostering widespread human rights and political participation, and by fostering a spirit of tolerance and cooperation among various religious and ethnic groups. Cut your military forces and budgets by 50–90%, thus freeing up resources for our other recommendations. Find ways to prevent national governments from killing large numbers of their own people. Virtually everyone will be better off if worldwide peace enables human energy to be devoted to building a satisfactory future.
- (2) Environment. We people of the future obviously require a planet capable of supporting life. Please move towards a sustainable relationship with the planet in agriculture, forestry, fish, wildlife, water and energy very soon. In order to accomplish this, you will have to take extraordinarily rapid and effective measures worldwide (a) to halt or even reverse population growth, (b) to reduce luxurious and frivolous consumption (and undue concentrations of wealth and unduly high incomes) throughout the world, (c) to live in balance and harmony with the interconnected web of life on earth, and (d) to minimize the most burdensome types of environmental deterioration (global warming, ozone depletion, pollution of drinking water, toxic and radioactive waste, loss of wilderness and species). Humanity will sometime have to stop its rapid population growth and its degradation of the planet: any sensible person can see that it is better to stop in the 1990s rather than later, when the damage and the costs of changing will be far worse. Some required changes (such as reducing births, conserving energy and fostering alternatives to automobiles in cities) will actually benefit your generation as well as ours.
- (3) Catastrophes. Please detect and study any other potential catastrophes or trends that might permanently end or severely harm human civilization. These might include an asteroid or comet more than three miles in diameter, a runaway epidemic, a biological experiment gone awry, the next reversal of the earth's magnetic poles, or the next ice age. Then vigorously take all necessary precautions to avoid the worst catastrophes of all. We do not want to inherit an unbelievably bleak and hostile world! Perhaps you should also consider self-sufficient space settlements as a means of ensuring the survival of a few hundred people from various cultures despite any terrestrial catastrophes.
- (4) Governance. With your present governance arrangements, neither you nor we can successfully cope with global problems. Please build an effective foundation for public priority setting and decision making at the local, regional and global level. In particular, develop and emphasize the following: (a) governance traditions that emphasize the long-term global perspective and the needs of all generations; (b) governance procedures that cope well with the total range of serious interlocking problems; (c) profound knowledge relevant to achieving a positive future; (d) plenty of opportunities for everyone to learn about the issues and to participate in various aspects of governance; (e) problem-solving processes that accept the best ideas and individuals regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic

status, cultural background or other non-merit characteristics; (f) freedom from corruption; (g) a widespread spirit of cooperation, dialogue and social responsibility among both leaders and citizens, instead of turning each issue into an unpleasant battle; (h) effective civic and social institutions. Balance your budgets instead of leaving us with burdensome debts. Try to get ahead of your major problems instead of letting them outstrip your efforts; please do not leave us with horrendous problems that could have been alleviated far more easily in your era than in ours.

- Knowledge. Conserve, enlarge and widely disseminate your most significant knowledge, insights and ideas. Double your efforts to understand humanity's broad contexts, such as our sources of meaning and purpose, our place and significance in the universe, and our potential relationship someday with other civilizations in this galaxy. We value knowledge and understanding as one of humanity's most treasured possessions. Please develop steps to ensure that the core of human culture, knowledge, literature, music and art will survive any war and any repressive worldwide political, religious, or military regime.
- (6) Children. Please reduce the amount of child poverty, hunger, neglect and abuse in order to stop physically, intellectually and emotionally stunting children's growth and development. The competence and creative problem-solving of tomorrow's adult population depend on your success at raising children with good mental and physical health, adequate self-esteem, and excellent skills in learning and thinking.
- (7) Learning. From early childhood to late adulthood, learning opportunities should be widespread. They can include libraries, discussion groups, informal education, support groups, printed materials, mass media and self-planned learning projects, as well as various educational programmes. This range of learning opportunities should help people of all ages to feel concern for others, understand global issues, grasp the significance of future generations, treasure all life on earth, feel committed to necessary changes, tolerate diverse cultures and views, cooperate for the common good, and pursue meaningful non-material values and goals.

We want to end this message with our gratitude for the awareness and efforts that are already well under way. Many of you already grasp our perspective, and we appreciate this. We are cautiously hopeful that more and more of you during the 1990s will understand our needs, and will treat them as equal in importance to your own short-term needs. If this widespread change in perspective occurs, there is an excellent chance that the necessary changes and strategies will then flow easily from it. We hope so.

Thank you very much for listening to our views so thoughtfully.

Three concluding questions

Three questions remain for further reflection.

(1) How much agreement or disagreement occurs among people who role play the views of future generations? This is a very important question. If decision-making processes incorporate spokespersons for posterity, as discussed at the beginning of this article, we need to know just how much those various spokespersons might disagree among themselves! In general there was high agreement among the people who drafted a message from future generations for this article. Although I did not collect data on this question, my impressions are that: (a) no message contradicts any other message—they are not on opposite sides of any question except

family planning; (b) the messages agree on a very general level; and (c) virtually all the participants would be willing to sign the final message presented here. (Indeed, I cannot think of any large cultural, national or religious group of people today who would reject most or all of this message, if they were willing to do the exercise in the first place.)

This amount of agreement is certainly different from the experience in most of today's legislatures: it would be much harder to obtain agreement on today's needs and priorities than on those of future generations. It may be that when anyone goes into the future and reflects on what needs to be said to the people of the 1990s, the major needs are so conspicuous that little disagreement arises.

Disagreement might arise, however, on exactly how to achieve the various items in the message and on who should pay or sacrifice. These immediate practical matters would typically not be within the mandate of a spokesperson for future generations, however, but rather would be within the realm of today's decision makers.

People with experience of poverty who role played future generations were at least as eager to include long-term perspectives and problems as were middleclass Westerners. The notion that impoverished people and people in the South have little regard for the future may well be a mistaken view. It ignores the fact that they care about their children and their future well-being. Also, because they are so close to their natural surroundings, many people in the South are more aware of environmental deterioration than many comfortable, insulated, middle-class city dwellers in the North.

Several people who read earlier drafts of this article stated that a quite different message would be written by people of different cultures and regions, and by people who are poor, disadvantaged or oppressed. This could be true. My own view, however, is near the opposite end of the continuum. Based on what I have learned in this project, my guess is that most people, if they wholeheartedly go into the future and hold a flexible dialogue with other people doing the same exercise, will agree on a list of priorities fairly similar to the above message. There will be differences, of course, but they will be minor compared to the vast areas of agreement. Almost any group would accept at least five or six of the seven core recommendations.

I hope several theses or other research projects will soon study these questions. The outcome could be good news or bad news for anyone designated as a spokesperson for future generations: if little agreement exists, then how could anyone claim to represent future generations?

Is this message too ambitious? From one perspective, this is not a very ambitious message. Humanity is quite capable of dramatic paradigm shifts. The list of seven priorities could be achieved if enough people around the world become strongly motivated to do so. Dozens of other worthy priorities have intentionally been omitted from the list to make it more feasible.

From another perspective, the message is overly ambitious. Even if humanity limited its efforts to this list of seven items and suspended its efforts to deal with all unrelated problems, the obstacles and costs would be daunting. My guess is that no one at present can see any realistic way (short of an incredibly effective and benevolent world dictatorship?) to produce that much individual change and societal improvement in just a few decades. All the more reason, then, to focus our efforts in the 1990s on the seven core recommendations from future generations in order to achieve a more positive future than we will by aiming at unrealistic targets and scattering our efforts too widely.

(3) How can we achieve a positive future? It is now clear to many thoughtful people that large, deep, far-reaching changes must be made by individuals, organizations and governments. Otherwise our children or grandchildren will spend their mature adult years in a difficult, nasty, bleak, barren environment-both social and physical. Several steps and fundamental priorities¹⁶ are needed in order to avoid such a negative outcome. Surely one of these is a worldwide effort aimed at increasing our awareness of the needs of future generations, and increasing our willingness to care about their well-being as much as our own. This perspective transformation is necessary for citizens, policy makers, business leaders and key people throughout government. People, processes and structures must shift towards supporting humanity's long-term flourishing.

The concept of future generations and their needs may be the centrepiece of a new global ethic, a new global religion, a new perspective for providing meaning and purpose in life, or a new approach for human civilization to achieve its highest potential. As a minimum, it may persuade human society to alter course and thus achieve a positive future.

Notes and references

- Future Generations Journal, No 8 (1991/1), page 7. The Council for Posterity was formed in the UK by the Institute for Social Inventions.
- Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Jean-Michel Cousteau, 'Petition for the rights of future generations', Calypso Log, February 1992, pages 6-8.
- Edith Brown Weiss, 'In fairness to future generations', Environment, 32(3), April 1990, pages
- Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living (Gland, Switzerland, IUCN, UNEP, IWW, 1991), page 17. Also recommended in The World Women's Congress Action Agenda, Miami,
- Trevor Hancock, news item in Turning Point 2000, March 1992, page 5; personal communication, 17 December 1992.
- Joanna Macy, World as Lover, World as Self (Berkeley, CA, Parallax Press, 1991), page 218. In addition, on pages 232-234 she suggests personal exercises for 'listening to the beings of the future'.
- Bruce E. Tonn, 'The Court of Generations: a proposed amendment to the US Constitution', Futures, 23(5), June 1991, pages 482-498.
- Frederik Pohl, 'The uses of the future', The Futurist, 27(2), March-April 1993, pages 9-12. Along a similar line, Warren Wagar (personal communication, 24 January 1993) recalls that, at the 1975 meeting of the World Future Society in Washington, Ted Kennedy promised that if he became President he would create a cabinet-level Department for the Future.
- Edward Joseph Walsh, Our Responsibilities Towards Future Generations (Doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1986; Ann Arbor, MI, University Microfilms).
- Jim Dator, 'Responding to the future', in Dorothy Douthit (editor), Planning the Good Life for Hawaii (Honolulu, HI, Hawaii Committee for the Humanities, 1981).
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- Martha Rogers, personal communication, 23 April 1992.
- Emmanuel Agius, James Calleja and Anton Mifsud Bonnici (editors), Promoting Our Responsibilities Towards Future Generations: Proceedings of the Nairobi and Malta Conferences (Malta, Foundation for International Studies, 1993).
- The purpose of this exercise is to provide a fresh perspective by increasing our empathy for the needs of future generations. In the true spirit of futures studies, one has to assume that there is still plenty of opportunity for change over the next few decades. In other words, although one mentally inhabits the future for this exercise, one also has to assume that the years between now and then are open rather than completed and fixed. This is quite different from developing a scenario

- that spells out what actually happened during the first third of the 21st century, or a future-dated memo based on that scenario.
- This exercise can be useful and thought-provoking in university courses in futures studies and global issues, and also in secondary school classrooms. For this article, student messages were collected and sent to me from Australia (Rick Slaughter, Education, University of Melbourne; Tony Stevenson, Communication Studies, Queensland University of Technology), Canada (several of my classes in the Critical Global and Community Issues focus, OISE/University of Toronto), Japan (Kaoru Yamaguchi, Economics and Business Administration, Nagoya University of Commerce), Korea (Tae-Chang Kim, 20 undergraduate students from 10 departments, Chungbuk National University), New Zealand (Brian Murphy, Marketing and International Business, University of Auckland), Nigeria (Godwin Sogolo, Philosophy, University of Ibadan), Pakistan (Ikram Azam, Pakistan Futuristics Institute, Islamabad), Thailand (participants from 13 nations in the first Asia-Pacific course on futures studies, Bangkok), USA (four locations: Jim Dator, Alternative Futures, University of Hawaii; Linda Hoenstine, Dr Phillips High School, Orlando, Florida; Robert Hoffman, Alternative Futures class, North Carolina State University; Oliver Markley, Studies of the Future, University of Houston Clear Lake). I am grateful to all the students and faculty members who contributed their ideas through these exercises. Receiving student messages from around the world-even a videotape and two audiotapes-has been a moving experience for me, as was my own trip into the future to spend some time in the shoes of five future people. It is important to acknowledge the richness contributed to the text by the ideas in many of the student messages, many of which were anonymous. I am also grateful for the critiques of early drafts from colleagues around the world and from my students in Toronto. Particularly penetrating or unsettling critiques were provided by Wendell Bell, Jim Dator, Marie Knapp, Martha Rogers, Rick Slaughter and Warren Wagar.
- Allen Tough, Crucial Questions About the Future (Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1991; and London, Adamantine, 1993), pages 47–69.