



WHAT FUTURE GENERATIONS MIGHT SAY TO US

Allen Tough

If future generations could speak to us, what might they say to us about our efforts to learn and teach about them? Probably they would ask us to understand their perspective, to feel connected to them, and to care deeply. When we teach about future generations we should affect the head, heart, soul and hands. This learning and teaching should include inspiration, transpersonal bonding, empowerment, a personal affirmation or pledge, a sense of meaning and purpose, and a commitment to action. Certain books and journals can be especially useful for gaining the perspective of future generations. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

More and more people are trying to learn and teach about future generations—about their perspective, their needs, and their views.

Like many other instructors around the globe, I am highly enthusiastic about the courses that I teach about future generations, about the global issues that will affect them, and about the personal implications and work implications for each person in the class. The intellectually challenging content is one reason for my enthusiasm: the subject matter is complex, difficult, fascinating, demanding. Another reason is the significance of the course. At the first session of my course called 'Crucial Questions About the Future,' I claim that no other course at the University of Toronto deals with more important questions. In addition, the emotional and personal dimensions of the subject matter make it a high-involvement and high-impact course for many students.

Now let us switch to the voice of future generations themselves. What if future generations could speak to us across the decades that separate us? What might they say to us about our efforts to learn and teach about them?

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Here is my best guess. Putting the message from future generations into their own words is a useful literary device to sharpen our understanding of their perspective.

A message from future generations

We, the people whom you call 'future generations,' appreciate your willingness to listen to our views on your efforts to learn and teach about us. We are glad that you are willing to listen to our neglected voices. Our views are usually not heard at all in your era because we have not yet been born, we cannot speak or lobby, we cannot carry placards in front of your legislative and parliament buildings, and we cannot vote in your elections. We feel a deep bond with you, and feel much love and admiration toward you. Thank you for listening.

We also appreciate your efforts to see us not as some abstract concept but as real people who will in fact be alive at some time after your era. Real people who do the same sorts of things that people have always done—talk, smile, laugh, gesture, frown, cry, love, wonder, work, build, walk, sing, hug, kiss, learn, teach, reflect, explore, play. Most of all, we appreciate your willingness to *care* about us.

Learning and teaching about us

Learning and teaching about our future world provide an essential foundation for achieving a positive future. You cannot achieve such a future without far-reaching learning and changes by individuals around the world. These individuals include all of you, not just political leaders, government officials, policy experts, or business leaders. You no doubt recall the prescient words of one early futurist, H. G. Wells: "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." You can successfully navigate through the next few decades only if a large proportion of the world's population understands global problems and potential futures, cares about future generations, accepts the need for change, and takes a cooperative and constructive approach to dealing with hard choices. Once enough people care about future generations, implementing the needed changes will be much easier.

Any path to a positive future will require deep changes in individual and corporate perspectives, values, and behavior. From early childhood to late adulthood, learning opportunities should be widespread. In every city on earth, schools, colleges, and adult education programs should provide a wide array of methods for people to study the future prospects of their civilization and their region. Learning opportunities can also include libraries, discussion groups, informal education, workshops, support groups, television, printed materials, computers, electronic sources, visual arts, performing arts, and self-planned learning projects. This range of learning opportunities should help people of all ages understand global issues, think sceptically and critically when appropriate, treasure all life on earth, feel concern for other people, grasp the importance of caring about all of us who will live after your era, feel committed to necessary changes, tolerate or treasure diverse cultures and views, cooperate for the common good, and pursue meaningful non-material goals.

Educational institutions should provide courses in futures studies, with increasing emphasis on the perspective of future generations, using approaches that affect the head, heart, soul and hands of people of all ages. Learning about us requires a wide range

of learning and changes, including cognitive learning, deep caring, emotions, attitudes, altruistically going beyond ego, learning from nature and music, questions about meaning and purpose in life, spiritual experiences and practices, empowerment, personal coping strategies, and action.

You could greatly enhance your futures education if you develop a better knowledge base about potential futures, conduct research on the processes of learning and teaching about the future, and experiment with innovative and profound approaches to such learning and teaching.

In addition, we urge you to consider a worldwide campaign to increase caring for future generations. This campaign could use various approaches, including:

1. clear, moving, powerful books and booklets written for the general public and for students;
2. superb television programs and films that enable you to 'experience' future generations, and to grasp the fact that we too are actual living people (in your future) rather than some abstract concept;
3. classroom exercises, such as role playing people in the future or visioning life far in the future;
4. writing a pledge to future generations;
5. a large membership organization for the general public, possibly combined with inspirational support groups;
6. transformative experiences that combine music, poetry, powerful prose, rituals, nature, inspirational meetings, and moving speakers (perhaps children or youth from various cultures).

All of your educational efforts could promote a widespread desire to cooperate and contribute. A caring nurturing attitude toward other people and the environment. Widespread kindness, goodwill, compassion, and altruism. Fewer people who intentionally take far more from the world than they contribute. More people eager to contribute to their world and to future generations. Much more hopefulness than cynicism in the world. A dramatic reduction in hostility, hatred, revenge, and destructiveness. Instead, a pervasive attitude of cooperating and contributing.

Your society should also do much more to help people feel a deep bonding or connectedness with all of humankind, with the planet and its diverse forms of life, and with future generations. This transpersonal aspect or 'non-religious spirituality' is often neglected in your era. We urge you to explore the usefulness of music, hymns, songs, poetry, prose, laser light shows, art, hiking, inspirational services, imaging exercises, children, cathedrals, mountains, observation towers, zoos, nature reserves, and scenic beauty for this purpose. As more and more people experience this deep connectedness, they will care strongly about humanity, future generations, and the planet—and will act on that deep caring.

New sorts of inspirational groups dedicated to future generations could be very useful. Interacting face-to-face or electronically, these groups would be held together by their deep caring for future generations—and by their efforts to build a better world for them. Various methods could be used to inspire and strengthen each member's sense of connectedness to humanity and its positive future. Members could share their feelings about the long-term future, discuss various ideas about us, reflect on the implications of recent events, and discuss some of the big questions. Members could also discuss their

current efforts to contribute, including their strategies, obstacles, triumphs, and failures. Many people want to make a positive difference to the world, but lack a sympathetic and inspirational support group. Such groups could be built on reverence for life in our galaxy, awe concerning the mysteries of the cosmos, commitment to service on behalf of future generations, and merging with the creative processes of the universe. These groups have the potential to develop into a worldwide network or a new global religion centered on humanity's positive future within a grand and inspiring universe.

Your society should also focus much more attention and support on the individual's desire for a sense of meaning and purpose in life. This sense of meaning can pervade a society in which people share a sense of connectedness with the cosmos, with its diverse life, and with the ongoing procession of generations. As your society moves in this direction, you will find that more and more lives are suffused with insight, wisdom, love, caring, altruism, meaning, and joy instead of ignorance, ill will, meaninglessness, and unhappiness. Some fears, losses, and sorrows will remain, but these will be focused more on future generations than on oneself. Over time, in fact, that distinction between oneself and future generations will blur. As the depth and strength of the connectedness increases, the boundaries between self and humanity become softer and less important. The dominant perception will be a sense of oneness. People will say, "I am at one with future generations, and they provide a shining beacon in my life."

A new thrust in the 1996–2005 decade

We are very enthusiastic about the new thrust that emerged in the 1990s to help people care about us and learn about us. Our historians call your 1996–2005 decade 'The Turnaround Decade.' We see it as the decade in which humanity began vigorous action to halt the various trends toward a bleak planet, an overpopulated poverty-stricken world, and widespread violence. Our historians give much of the credit to the efforts of universities, colleges, schools, libraries, newspapers, magazines, and television to educate people around the world about these problems.

Your decade receives credit for spreading futures education throughout the educational system. This occurred not only in courses specifically known as futures studies or alternative futures or future generations studies, but also interwoven with many other areas of the curriculum.

For some reason, perhaps to illustrate the diversity of educational possibilities, four examples are most often cited by our historians. One example started in 1998. A revised chemistry course in a European university began with the thinning of the ozone layer and then built the rest of the chemistry course around this problem. A second example, as the 21st century arrived, was a new global university that had future generations studies as the core of its curriculum. It inspired university professors around the world to contribute research and disciplined writing about future generations, and to bring the future generations perspective into all of their teaching. The third example originated in an American secondary school in 2002. The students in a social psychology course interviewed their family and neighbours about why they put their own narrow short-term needs ahead of humanity's long-term needs, even though they and their own children would suffer in the long run. Throughout the course, these data were then used as the basis for studying our 'future generations' perspective on various global issues. The fourth example is a global movement called 'Mother Earth and Me.' First proposed by a young

Chinese graduate student of education, it eventually influenced people around the world. For her, the core of the movement was “to significantly raise our ecological consciousness in each of our daily activities.”

Even more important than the particular examples that they cite, our historians are impressed by the *depth and breadth* of your education about future generations. The ‘five-prong approach,’ as it came to be called, was developed just before the turn of the century by a group of professors who met regularly through the generosity of a far-sighted Japanese businessman. Their approach was so compelling that it spread very rapidly within the field of futures studies, though modified somewhat to fit each particular culture and nation. The key point of the five-prong approach is that all five prongs or aspects must somehow be included in all education about future generations. Otherwise the students feel their education is not complete, not sufficiently holistic and integrated.

The five prongs are MIND, HEART, MEANING, EMPOWERMENT, and ACTION. MIND includes the incredibly rich and complex cognitive learning that must occur in order for people to understand the various problems and trends that influence the future—their causes, their interlocking connections with other problems, and their possible solutions. For some learners, a deep earthquake-like transformation occurs in world view or paradigm. HEART refers to the whole range of emotional responses that students have when they learn about potential futures—excitement, exhilaration, eager curiosity, and the joys of learning, along with more negative emotional and psychological reactions such as anguish, rage, fear, pain, sorrow, guilt, turmoil, paralysis, denial, and psychic numbing. MEANING points to the implications for each student’s higher self, spiritual questions, meaning and purpose in life, and fundamental life goals—the ‘what is life all about?’ side that all of us have. (In our time, we are much more comfortable and profound in talking about this side of life than you are in your era.) EMPOWERMENT means that students are encouraged to feel hope and energy and commitment toward the future—instead of giving up all hope for a positive future, and sinking into a life of despair or luxurious pleasure. Inspiring success stories of small but effective efforts to improve the situation can increase empowerment, as do powerful visions of a positive future. Finally, the ACTION component emphasizes the importance of going beyond the other four components and actually *doing* various things to enhance the prospects for future generations, ranging from recycling and other small efforts through to major projects and even fresh career choices.

We are very grateful to your era for developing this five-prong approach, and we want you to know how much we have benefited from its impact on students over the years.

An affirmation

Within the five-prong approach, saying an affirmation aloud can be a useful activity. We would like to suggest that students, teachers, politicians, and the general public be encouraged to repeat an affirmation at least once a week, either individually or in a class or group. Here is the sort of ‘affirmation to future generations’ that we have in mind:

Even though you live far in my future, I know that you are real and human, not just an abstract concept in my imagination. You laugh, dance, think, and talk. You work, play, love, and care. I feel connected with you and with the planet that we share. You and I are one species, one civilization, many cultures. I care deeply about you. Your well-being is just as important as mine. You are a shining beacon in my work and my life.

Reading: the top ten

As you develop university courses in future generations studies, as you develop reading lists for other future-oriented courses in schools and adult education, and as libraries develop displays for the general public, here are our suggestions for the ten most useful books for understanding the perspective and needs of those of us who live in your future. We have made this portion of our message very specific because we see, from our perspective in your future, just how valuable each of these books can be for students, futurists, and the general public.

- Emmanuel Agius and Salvino Busuttil (eds). *What Future for Future Generations?* Papers from stimulating conferences on future generations, sponsored by the Foundation for International Studies at the University of Malta.
- Wendell Bell. *Foundations of Futures Studies*. A comprehensive guide to studying the future.
- *Caring for the Earth: A Strategy of Sustainable Living*. A total plan of bold action to sustain the planet.
- Eric Chaisson. *The Life Era: Cosmic Selection and Conscious Evolution*. In the history of the universe, you and we are now in the era of widespread life and diverse civilizations.
- Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, and Jorgen Randers. *Beyond the Limits: Confronting Global Collapse; Envisioning a Sustainable Future*. Understanding the planet, and moving toward a better relationship with it.
- Ernest Partridge (ed.). *Responsibilities to Future Generations: Environmental Ethics*. Several philosophers discuss your relationship with us.
- Jonathan Schell. *The Fate of the Earth*. A profound and powerful look at the horrors that you may inflict on us.
- Richard A. Slaughter. *New Thinking for the New Millennium: The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*. This, plus his subsequent *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* series, provides a worldwide panorama of relevant ideas.
- *Thinking about Future Generations, Creating a New History for Future Generations*, and other anthologies of wide-ranging essays published in Kyoto by the Institute for the Integrated Study of Future Generations (Future Generations Alliance Foundation).
- Allen Tough. *A Message from Future Generations*. A powerful comprehensive outline of the perspective, needs, requests, and advice of future generations (forthcoming).

Reading: ten other useful items

Finally, in hopes that our suggestions will be useful for students and the general public, we list ten additional items for further reading.

- Norman Care. *On Sharing Fate*. The need to take our needs into account, since you and we share the same fate.
- Alan Durning. *How Much is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Fate of the Earth*. One of many useful books from staff members at the Worldwatch Institute.
- *Future Generations Journal of the Global Network on Responsibilities Towards Future Generations and their Environment*. Published by the Future Generations Programme at the University of Malta.
- *Future Survey: A Monthly Abstract of Books, Articles, and Reports Concerning Fore-*

casts, Trends, and Ideas about the Future. Indispensable. Edited by Michael Marien and published by the World Future Society.

- *Futures: The Journal of Forecasting, Planning and Policy*. A forum for some of the most thoughtful writing on the future.
- Martha Rogers. *Learning about Global Futures* (University of Toronto doctoral dissertation). Patterns of the mind, heart, and soul when students put themselves in the shoes of future generations.
- Allen Tough. *Crucial Questions about the Future*. What is most important, how can you gain meaning and purpose, and how can you help us?
- Allen Tough. Making a pledge to future generations (*Futures* January 1993 and *The Futurist* May 1993) and What future generations need from us (*Futures* December 1993 and *The Futurist* March 1995). A sample pledge to us, and the original version of a message from us.
- Warren Wagar. *The Next Three Futures: Paradigms of Things to Come*. A bold conceptual framework for organizing the various approaches to the future.
- Edith Brown Weiss. *In Fairness to Future Generations: International Law, Common Patrimony, and Intergenerational Equity*. A legal approach that takes our needs and rights into account.