

FORESIGHT

By Herman Greene

Humans are world-makers. We humans have used foresight to build cities, empires, companies. In the United States the “manifest destiny” to have the nation extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific led to a steadily advancing frontier. We have dreamed of putting men on the moon and flying and have accomplished both. Our great visions have been of expansion and improving living conditions. Now a different kind of foresight is needed. It is foresight about climate change and the health of Earth’s ecosystems and what we humans need to do in response. As Bruno Latour in his 2013 Gifford Lectures, the maxim of the modernists has been *plus ultra*, always something more, now for the Earthbound (in other words us), it must be *plus intra*, inside Earth, inside limits, and those limits must be decided by and lived by people in the body politic.

Given this we might reflect on the evanescent “future” and what will be required for us to devote a significant portion of our attention to the long-term future on a global scale. We must do this if we are to deal with climate change and our ecological future.

We don’t know the future. It will always surprise us. What we call “the future” is our sense of what lies ahead. When the future is actualized, it becomes the present; and then it becomes a vantage point for further anticipation. While the future is never what we think it will be, our ideas of the future are important because they determine our action in the present. We act in the present to attain some goal or avoid a threat in the future. Even the acts of sustaining and maintaining are done so we may live in the future.

Our sense of the future follows, in part, from our sense of where we are in the present and the past. We project our understanding of the present and past into the future.

Though our sense of the future follows on our senses of the present and the past, the opposite is also true—our senses of the present and the past follow from our anticipation of the future.

Past, present, and future intertwine in continuous process.

Our sense of the future depends on two other things. The first is our notions of the possibilities and limits given in existence. These possibilities and limits are real. Our notions of what they are vary. We conceive of these possibilities and limits based on our culture, our experience, our knowledge, and our concepts. Our understanding of the universe, including its possibilities, limits, dynamics, and purposes, and the human role in the universe, is our cosmology. Our sense of the future is always implicitly based, in part, on our cosmology. When people disagree, what may appear as a difference of opinion on the surface often traces back to a difference in cosmology. Our cosmologies never fully reflect the real, but they operate within us as guides to the real. We more often know our cosmology intuitively as pattern, rather than as conscious or logical thought. Yet we seek to express these patterns in, among other ways, language, liturgy, and art, and these expressions affect how we act.

The second has no name, yet it is the subject of every discipline. Following Alfred North Whitehead, I call it “creativity.” Words, among others, associated with creativity are novelty, zest, adventure, inspiration, intuition, imagination, aesthetics, and holiness. While creativity can be cultivated, it cannot be forced or controlled. We don’t know where it comes from. It is the introduction of the new, the unimaginable, into existence; still, however, it comes to us within the possibilities and limits of existence in absolute terms and in temporal terms. Newton could not make a rock fall up—this was and is an absolute limitation. Hippocrates could not invent a polio vaccine in his time—this was a temporal limitation. Much had to happen after Hippocrates lived for Jonas Salk to invent the polio vaccine.

We have many senses of the future, some are of only a minute away, and others are of days, years, centuries, millennia, or eons away. We imagine futures about many aspects of our lives, some are of ourselves, and others are of our families, nations, planet, and beyond. Some of these futures are private, some we share with others, some with small groups and some with progressively larger groups. We constantly maintain and juggle multiple futures. We attend to immediacies and we attend to medium- and long-term futures.

As we grow in consciousness, both the past and the future expand. Further, our sense of the present expands as we experience the auspiciousness of this moment in time. The present is our bridge between past and future—we decide what is important to us and we create the future.