

WITH OR WITHOUT A VISION OF THE FUTURE

By Rod Matthews

If we wish to help shape our future, we must first have a clear picture, or 'vision', of what we want that future to be and how we can go about achieving it. An example vision is put forward by Paul Raskin, the founding director of The Tellus Instituteⁱ a non-profit research and policy organization.

In looking to the future, we must address the big issues humanity now faces, and bring like-minded people together. For this to happen, the vision for the future must be compelling. The Great Transitions Initiative attempts to do this by presenting three basic scenarios for human and world futures – business as usual, descent to barbarism and a great transition.

A vision

Viktor Frankel was working in the emerging field of psychotherapy and psychology when the Nazi's gained power in Germany. As a Jewish doctor, he managed to survive the horrors of four concentration camps and countless unspeakable acts. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*,ⁱⁱ Frankel suggests that what keeps people alive in difficult times is knowing they still have something significant to do. The people who survived the concentration camps, according to Frankel, were not the physically fit, the rich or the smart; they were the people who were not ready to die. This is the power of purpose.

The Great Transitions Initiative seeks to evoke this power by identifying a purpose and a direction for a global future. It is not an easy task, given that while we (as a species) are very good at generating scenarios for the future, our accuracy is little better than chance. Consider the 1950s view of life in the year 2000. In the 1950s we were experiencing the end of the transport revolution. Cars were accessible to most families and many individuals in developed nations. Air travel was becoming increasingly affordable to the middle classes and many first-world cities were investing in mass transit systems. So it is little surprise that the futurists' view of the year 2000 involved flying cars, tele-porters and people living on the moon. The trap for futurists is to avoid the temptation to take what we see today and extrapolate more of the same. It is not possible to accurately predict the future.

The Great Transitions Initiative (GTI) has gone some way in avoiding this trap by doing a couple of things:

1. Envisaging multiple scenarios, not just one.
2. Generalising, and avoiding specifics. (This is not a criticism – in some respects visions need to be artfully vague to allow more people to associate with them. The challenge will be, as it so often is, in the detail and execution of those visions.)

The GTI's vision revolves around three possibilities, each with two scenarios:

1. Conventional worlds
 - a) Free market
 - b) Policy reform
2. Barbarism
 - a) Fortress World
 - b) Breakdown

3. Great transitions
 - a) Eco-communalism
 - b) New sustainability

Conventional worlds

Conventional worlds is a business as usual type scenario – the classic ‘Option 1 is that we do nothing’ – and is a great way of highlighting that the status quo is not a real option. Having said that, Paul Raskin and the GTI could be falling into the trap of extrapolating on what we see today and not allowing for a black swan.

There are two suggested scenarios to conventional worlds: free market, and policy reform.

Free market

This is where the economy continues to be driven by the financial elite; the invisible hand of the market is left to determine the way forward. This concept has always rested on the idea that popularity equals quality.

Benefits and opportunities:

- We enter a period of enlightened consumerism where global online communities make the good things popular and the bad things unpopular.
- Market forces throw capital at the technologies that are required – renewable energies, recycling, waste reduction/elimination.
- So far, so good. The invisible hand of the market has worked well in improving the quality of life for the average person over the last 200 years.

Drawbacks and threats:

- continued boom / bust cycles
- greater potential for environmental degradation
- an increased gap between the haves and have nots
- barbarism – a possibility if the free market fails.

Policy reform

This is where governments redirect and constrain the market forces; power is in the hands of the policy elite who develop bureaucratic institutions to enact policy stewardship. This concept rests on the belief that the elected officials know best.

Benefits and opportunities:

- The tools to do this are largely in place, and most governments are evolved enough to determine and enact policy. Governments are growing in size as they merge into zones of collaboration, for example the Euro zone, APAC, and the Arab League.
- John Stuart Mill, a highly influential 19th century philosopher, political scientist and civil servant, was a supporter of the idea that the weight of your vote in an election is dependant on your level of education. Through policy reform, the educated make policy, not popularity.
- Policy reform will be a good tool to start the ball rolling.

Drawbacks and threats:

- Unless policy makers have the support of the economic elite, the popular majority or a well-organised minority, there will not be the political will to do anything.

- This transition would require a continued and concerted effort that would no doubt need to be longer than any term of government. (Perhaps we need a benevolent dictator!)
- The danger is also that the policy elites (as is the case with most groups who experience power and control) lose sight of the vision, lose contact with the people and suffer a revolution. In which case, again, we head into barbarism.

Barbarism

Barbarism is a scenario, not an option! It outlines what will happen if we fail to negotiate the great transition. There are two scenarios suggested, but perhaps they can be seen as a continuation of the same idea.

There is a well-documented theory in history called Victors Syndrome, which suggests that when the victorious city/nation/culture reaches a certain point in power and influence, its enemies unite to bring about its demise. So in the barbarism scenario, Fortress World would descend into breakdown, as those outside the fortress would become increasingly dissatisfied with their lot, unite and then revolt.

Fortress World

Fortress World is an authoritarian response to the beginnings of societal breakdown. Paul Raskin suggests that Fortress World is what will happen if the free market fails. I would suggest that it can also be an outcome of failed policy making. We only need to look into history to find many examples of Fortress Worlds that have materialised because of poor policy making by the bureaucratic elite (for example North Korea, Stalinist Russia, fascist Italy, Hitler's Germany and even France before the revolution – Fortress World is not just the result of failed markets).

The suggestion here is that as the gap widens between the haves and have nots, there will be a move towards protecting the haves. It should be noted that the haves are most obviously (but not only) the wealthy. They can also be the powerful, through control (examples include political haves, religious haves, social haves and technological haves). Protecting the haves is human nature and goes some way towards explaining why true change rarely comes from the establishment – change usually comes from the periphery. This is due to our evolutionary need to avoid loss, and the nature of evolution itself.

Some leading indicators of a movement towards Fortress World might include:

- a return to tariffs and protectionism of developed nations
- increased laws and legislation being passed that penalise law breakers, while there is a reduced amount of laws and legislation around creating opportunity and assistance of an emerging underclass
- raising entry levels to opportunity and reducing access to resources like education, equity and equality
- an increase in gated communities and judgement of people based on their postcode
- a reduction in legal migration and increase in an illegal migration
- an increase in the collapse of nations and governments and a breakdown of social order in some countries and regions
- an increase in the need for humanitarian activities (for example refugee camps and food drops)

- an increase in not-for-profit and non-government organisations, as those who live in the fortress become increasingly uncomfortable with what is happening outside the fortress.

Breakdown

It is easy to recognise breakdown from the outside – we only need to look at places like Zimbabwe, North Korea and Somalia. The question is: would we recognise it in our own society before it is too late to stop it from happening?

In breakdown, institutions fail, the standard of living drops significantly, we descend into chaos and anarchy, and the people who have been telling us that the end is nigh are finally vindicated.

It is interesting to note, however, that there have always been (and will always be) people who will tell us that the end is nigh. In *The Last Apocalypse – Europe at the Year 1000 AD*,ⁱⁱⁱ James Reston Junior tells how in the year 999, Europe was in breakdown. Vikings, Moors and Magyars were responsible for untold barbarism. In response, Christian cities united and revolted by slaughtering the leaders (and their families) of anyone who opposed them. According to the logic of the time, if Christianity failed it would be the book of Revelation come to pass.

People often cite the difference this time as being that if we fail, it means the end of the entire planet. While this might be true in a few worst case scenarios, the same was also true during the Cold War. In some ways we need people who say ‘The end is nigh’ as it prompts us into action; but in other ways we also need to take doomsayers with a healthy dose of perspective.

Great transitions

These are the alternatives to conventional worlds and barbarism as proposed by Paul Raskin. I would suggest that the two scenarios Raskin proposes exist at either end of a continuum within the model first proposed by Dr Clare W. Graves^{iv} now known as Spiral Dynamics.^v This model suggests a double helix type movement of people’s driving values and behaviours as they evolve individually and collectively. The values shift from a self-expressive preference to a sacrificial preference.

At the moment, Graves would suggest that we are exiting a self-expressive phase and entering a sacrificial phase of human development. Spiral Dynamics refers to this transition as first leaving ‘station orange’, where station orange is about the values of the entrepreneurial and being able to express oneself without intentionally hurting others, and then arriving at ‘station green’, where station green is about a movement to more humanistic values and a sense of community.

Raskin suggests two versions of Spiral Dynamics’ station green: eco-communalism and new sustainability.

Eco-communalism

This is the option favoured by anarchists and environmental extremists. It argues for a movement towards localisation. A good argument for the ridiculousness of our current set-up is made in *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* by Alain de Botton.^{vi} In it he documents the movements of a fish caught off the coast of India, transported to a packaging facility south of Russia and then flown to a supermarket in Manchester, England, where a mother purchases

the fish and serves it to her son who doesn't want to eat fish. The fish has travelled thousands of kilometres, resulting in a disproportionate amount of carbon emissions, only to be half-eaten and then thrown in the bin. A modern day tragic comedy!

When you consider this, it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that we need to move towards a localisation of production, supply and consumption. An example of the arguments for this approach is in a video called *The Economics of Happiness*, directed by Helena Norberg-Hodge, Steven Gorleck and John Page.^{vii}

The Economics of Happiness takes us to remote communities that are just coming into contact with western culture. They highlight what these cultures lose in the exchange and draw attention to the drawbacks of what western culture brings. We are then taken to eco-communes in the west where people are growing their own food and living in communities where each person contributes in some way.

At one point in the documentary, one of the people who runs a small community farm tells us how one farm can effectively supply up to twenty families. This highlights why eco-communalism will not work on any large scale.

Here is one example: There are 140 houses in my street alone. This means we would need to find seven families who are each willing and able to change their lifestyles to one of growing food for the other twenty.

History is littered with examples where communities have moved back to localisation and away from specialisation. As Matt Ridley would suggest in his book *The Rational Optimist*,^{viii} localisation is poverty, and specialisation is growth. I think Raskin and Ridley would agree that eco-communalism is not a realistic option.

New sustainability

Raskin leads us to new sustainability as being the desired option and, when compared to the other options highlighted, it is of course the most desirable. Raskin talks of a new global citizenship and global responsibility. His vision is a humanistic one that recognises our place in nature, rather than trying to conquer it. He suggests that global sustainability is about:

- reducing conflict
- increasing freedom
- increasing development
- reducing carbon emissions and environmental degradation
- improving water supply and ecosystems.

Interestingly, Raskin makes little mention of population, and to me this is a major flaw in the vision. All of the above issues are driven by an increase in population without a proportional increase in sustainable technologies, or even physical space on the planet.

Raskin talks of the players who will start this movement, and identifies them as being:

- intergovernmental organisations
- corporations.

Another challenge for the visions of the GTI is how to create the support it would need among the general population. Without grass-roots support, corporations will not move against market forces and governments will not have the political will.

The GTI suggests that there are levers we need to pull in order to start this evolution. They are:

- values
- knowledge
- demographic
- social
- economic
- governance.

I would add:

- behavioural
- technological.

In an ABC Radio National program called *Big Ideas*,^{ix} Gunter Pauli talks of moving beyond the green economy and towards a blue economy. The green economy comes with problems: first, it is expensive and revolves around ‘doing less bad’. It requires investment in R&D, retooling of factories, loss of jobs, marketing and advertising, and indeed all the costs associated with creating a new market. On the other hand, the blue economy uses what we already have and forces us to think about how we can do NO bad. Pauli itemises many revolutionary technological advances that are a model for Raskin’s new sustainability.

The nature of our history suggests that the solutions will come with or without an overall vision. Through a combination of policy initiatives, grass roots movements, market forces and sheer blind luck we will make a transition because we have no other choice.

ⁱ <http://www.tellus.org/>

ⁱⁱ Frankel, Viktor (1956), *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Beacon Press, Boston

ⁱⁱⁱ Reston, James Junior (1998), *The Last Apocalypse – Europe at the Year 1000 AD*, Bantom Double Day Dell Publishing Group, London

^{iv} Graves, Clare, W. (1974), *The Futurist*, World Future Society, Maryland

^v Beck, Don Edward and Cowan, Christopher (1996), *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change*, Blackwell Publishing, Carlton, Victoria

^{vi} de Botton, Alain (2009), *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, Penguin Group, Camberwell, Vic

^{vii} *The Economics of Happiness* (2011), directed by Helena Norberg-Hodge, Steven Gorleck and John Page, DVD first published in Australia by www.aracariaguides.com.au

^{viii} Ridley, Matt (2010), *The Rational Optimist – How Prosperity Evolves*, Fourth Estate, UK

^{ix} Pauli, Gunter (2011), Presentation at the University of Sydney 16th August 2011. Aired on ABC’s *Big Ideas*, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/bigideas/stories/2011/08/16/3293620.htm>