

Experiencing Your Impact on Future Generations

Oliver W. Markley,
Professor Emeritus, Human Sciences and Studies of the Future,
University of Houston- Clear Lake

ABSTRACT

This is an exercise in “*visionary futures exploration*” - the use of imagination and intuition to discern transformational future possibilities and their implications for present-day values, attitudes, policies and decision making. A “mental time travel” script is presented which, when read aloud by a facilitator, takes the hearer(s) on a journey to different time periods, both past and future.

Two different “probable” futures are explored: one based on the assumption of “continuation of current trends and the dominant cultural paradigm; and the other based on the assumption that sustained efforts for a transformation to a sustainability-oriented cultural paradigm are successful. These journeys end by having the participants first scan back across all the time periods they visited, so as to get a more global sense of perspective on what is truly most important; and in response, to imagine sending a message from the future back to the present regarding, “*What future generations need from us.*”

This exercise is relatively easy to stage and has been used successfully with both children and adults in a variety of settings.

INTRODUCTION

What if we were able to look at our present place in human history from the vantage point of future generations? What would we find most important about this particular era in human history? If we had the hindsight of “future history” to guide us, what changes in underlying attitudes, behaviors, laws and policy would we suggest as being wise - or even imperative - in order to minimize the likelihood that future generations will inherit a world that has in many ways been ruined by those who came before?

This paper offers a way to do this. It presents a script for an experiential “guided cognitive imagery” exercise which takes the participant on an imaginary journey through various times and places in human history past *and* future.

The thematic focus of the guided imagery journey is the exponential increase in “ecological load” that can be seen as occurring across the major epochs of human history, and which threatens to overtake the ecological carrying capacity of the planet, with drastically negative consequences for future generations if it long continues. *Ecological load* may be visualized as comprising all the impacts that are flowing from overall *population times per capita consumption* (especially consumption of “non-renewable” resources).

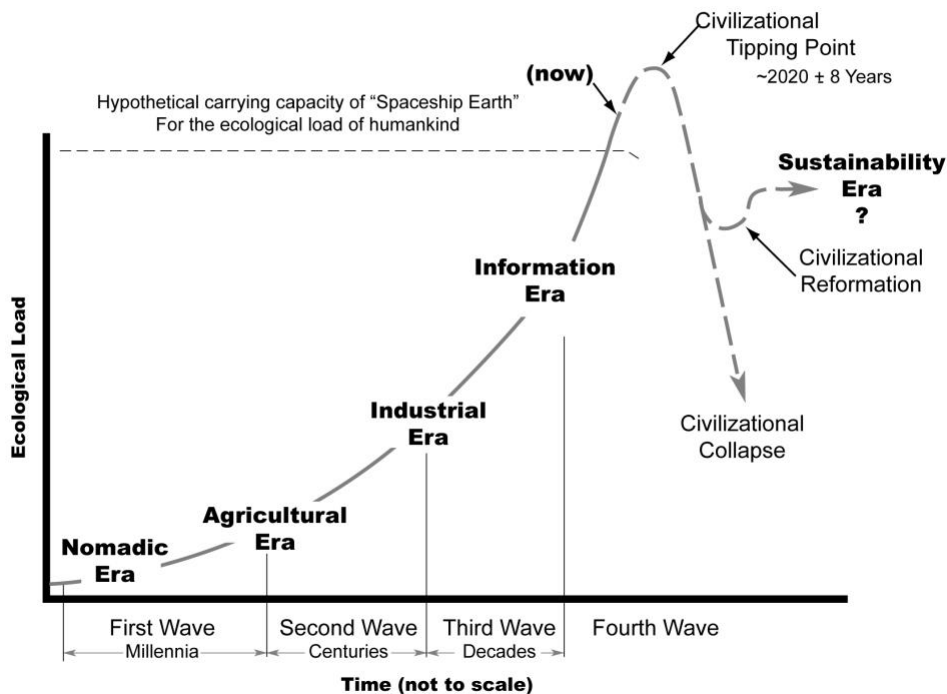


FIGURE ONE
Two Idealized Alternative Future Outcomes
To the Threat of Overshooting the Carrying Capacity of “Spaceship Earth”

Figure One depicts a graphical view of this ecological load theme in a way that summarizes many of the trends and emerging issues that need to be appreciated and responded to by leaders, students, and other citizens. In some situations, it may be good for participants to hear about and/or to discuss materials such as Figure One before engaging in the guided imagery exercise, which follows.

It is suggested that the following script be read “as is” as a way to help a group of people experience significant needs of future generations. When doing so, please ignore the bold-face section titles and be sure to read slowly, with long pauses when appropriate, to allow for the inner experience of participants.

A SCRIPT FOR EXPLORING OUR IMPACTS ON FUTURE GENERATIONS

PART I: THE PAST AND CURRENTLY MOST PROBABLE FUTURE OF THE HUMAN RACE

Induction and Scene One: Nomadic Tribe Facing Climate Change

What follows is an exercise in imagination - an exercise in which your intuition can educate you regarding what future generations may most urgently need from us. You will be asked to imagine being in a series of historical eras both past and future - in order to get a personal “feel” for the impacts that societal policies and life styles may have on future generations. You will also get a feel for whether there are any changes that we may

now need to make on behalf of those who will be coming after us many generations in the future. It is easy and fun to do, so just relax and be ready for an interesting adventure. *Here is the exercise:*

Imagine that you are a student in school. Your teacher is lecturing about history, saying that she hopes you will learn something about people at different times and places have coped with new problems never before experienced on the spaceship home we call “Planet Earth.”

Imagine that right now the teacher is describing the very beginnings of civilization ... a time when some nomadic tribes who lived by hunting and gathering were facing great difficulty. Because of climate shifts, the types of plants and animals they depended on for food were often no longer where they expected to find them. So ... many of these peoples had to figure out how to respond, if there were to be any future generations coming after them.

The lecture is happening just after lunch and your stomach is comfortably full. It is a warm spring afternoon and since the schoolroom windows are open, you notice that you can occasionally feel a breeze blowing on your face. You hear birds chirping and bees buzzing outside, and as the teacher continues what seems like a long lecture about history, you gradually slip into a daydream in which you are actually there in that nomadic tribe. You may wish to let your eyes now close if they are not already closed, so that you can more fully appreciate the details of your imaginary daydream. If you could smell what it smells like to be there in the Nomadic Tribe, *What would it smell like? ...* [... = pause]

See how people are dressed. *What do they look like?...*

Look down and see how you yourself are dressed - what you have on your feet, ... what you have on your body. ... *Are you young or old; male or female? ...*

What part do you play in the life of the tribe? ... What do the people you live with depend on you to do for the tribe? ...

Let yourself be aware of the food scarcity that your people are facing, and the uncertainty that the future now holds. *How do people in your tribe deal with problems that threaten your future? ... What do they do to find the answers they need? ... What is the general level of integrity in this tribe? [And what do they do with people who are stronger than most others and try to use their strength to get more than their share of food when it is scarce?]*

Scene Two: Traditional Village Facing Transition to Industrialism and Urbanization

O.K. Now imagine that your teacher has changed the topic of the history lecture, and is now talking about how the nomadic tribes eventually learned to domesticate animals, to harvest plants from seeds they sowed, and to even build villages - things that made it seem possible for the tribe to survive sustainably in one place indefinitely.

So your daydream shifts, and you find yourself in the same region as in the first daydream, but many thousands of years later; at a time when the impacts, first of colonialism and more recently of global corporate domination are being felt in all parts of the world and traditional indigenous lifestyles which are ecologically sustainable, are giving way to cultural lifestyles that are not.

Imagine that you are now an elder in a traditional village who is concerned for the future of your people, now that your sustainable ways of living are giving way to being at the mercy of powerful institutions many thousands of miles away.

You once again become aware of the sights and sounds and smells of what is all around you. Take a few moments to really get into all of that, receiving whatever images come ...

As you continue your daydream, become aware of what you, as a village elder, most deeply value. *What needs to happen in order that future generations of your people will be able to realize these values, should they so choose? ... How do people in your village deal with problems that threaten their future? Especially when their own leaders side with wealthy foreign interests rather than their own people when deciding what to do with the resources of the land and community? ...*

Transition from exploring the past to exploring probable futures

And now, in your daydream, your history teacher has moved up to the present time, and is talking about how the dominant cultures of the world today are based on patterns of population growth, resource consumption, pollution and ecological destruction that cannot be sustained indefinitely, and quite possibly not longer than one generation.

In this way, your teacher begins to talk about the future – and about the idea of different *probable* futures that could come true depending on what types of choices and actions we undertake. She goes on to say that in order to learn what we need to know in order to make wise choices about what we do, it is often useful to know the probable future consequences of choosing one path of action versus another, and that for this reason the last part of her lecture will cover two different probable futures. But she says that the best way to explore the future is to actually be there in the theatre of your imagination, and to just see what intuitively shows up for you to experience there.

She begins by talking about a first type of future – what will in all likelihood unfold if our society continues to develop and apply powerful technologies and institutional forms for competitive domination with no parallel increase in ethical integrity and wisdom throughout the society. And she promises that she will talk about a very different type of future a little while later.

And to make it real for you, the teacher suggests that you and each of the other students might imagine what life will be like for yourself, your children, and your children's children as this type of future unfolds.

The First Probable Future -- Continuation of the Growth-Oriented Socioeconomic Growth Paradigm of Western Culture

Scene Three: The Short-Range Future - facing challenges to ecological sustainability

So...beginning with the first probable future, your teacher is now talking about how the spread of advanced technologies all over the world has led to an exponential growth in population, pollution, resource depletion and other things which, if they continue to grow, will exceed the very carrying capacity of “Spaceship Earth” - both for human civilization and for other important species which together spring forth in this planetary nest.

So your daydream shifts once again, and you find yourself about one generation – or twenty to thirty years – beyond [current year]¹, ready to explore the probable future brought about by a continuation of current trends and the dominant socioeconomic paradigm, which is generating them. If current forecasts prove at all accurate, this is an especially crucial time regarding the potential over-reaching of planetary ecology. you might just like to let your imagination do its thing in the way it knows best how to do.

As you once again let your intuition do its thing in the way it knows best how to imaginatively do, *What do you notice first?... What are the main things that attract your attention?... What do you see and how does it feel to be on Earth at this time? ... What has happened as a result of greed-based systems of ecological exploitation? ... What progress has been made in dealing with problems such as growth in population, pollution, and so forth? What is the general level of integrity here? ... What do people do about and corporations and governmental agencies that behave corruptly, especially as regards ecology?...*

Scene Four: The Long-Range Future – Responding to Sustainability Challenges

While your teacher continues to lecture about the future, your daydream jumps ahead still further, to about 200 years, or eight generations into the future: the year []. If current forecasts prove at all accurate, this is a time in which things have become decidedly clear - one way or the other - how the whole issue is turning out regarding humankind overrunning and despoiling much of the ecology of the planet. In your daydream you find yourself alive here in the world of []. You are able to sense what it is like here, and what type of life you have. As you begin to be aware of this, *What do you notice first? ... What is the “feel” of life here? ... How have things turned out regarding ecological sustainability. What actions by previous generations made things turn out this way? ...*

Scanning Our History for Patterns

Now imagine that the teacher has ended her lecture on about history, and that you are going to be given a short quiz on the impressions you got from the places and times you visited - *both past and probable futures*. To help you prepare for the quiz, you might want to scan back across them all, to see what they have in common, what seems most important, and so forth. ...

As you begin to do this, you notice that your perspective is out of time altogether, able to visualize different aspects of the past, and different future possibilities, all the same time.

¹ Please write all appropriate dates in the script before leading the exercise with a group.

So, recall your experience with:

The Nomadic Tribe - facing climate change ... *The Traditional Village* - facing transition to industrialism and urbanization ... *The Future that is likely emerge from a continuation of currently dominant values, policies and levels of integrity*... first focusing on the *Shorter Range Future*, what things are like in *one generation*, or about 25 years ahead, facing limits to growth ... and now focusing on *The Longer-Range Future* - eight generations, or about 200 years ahead, responding to limits to growth ...

And now reviewing what you experienced in *the Future that is likely to emerge from a profound shift in currently dominant values, policies and levels of integrity, those that support a global society that is equitable, just and sustainable*. ... First focusing on the *Shorter Range Future*, what things are like in *one generation*, or about 25 years ahead, transforming how we respond to limits to growth ... and now focusing on *The Longer-Range Future* – eight generations, or about 200 years ahead, when the results of The Great Turning have become clear.

As you scan across all of these and get a sense of what is common, what is different, what would be your answer to the question: *What things stand out for you as most important?*

Given what you now see about human history, both past and future, *if you could send a message from the future back to the present, so as to communicate what future generations most urgently need from us, what would that message be?* *Imagine telling this message to at least one other person after you return from this mental time travel journey.*

And now, let yourself have a vision of what you could have been doing way back in [], that would have shifted your life to be more significantly more responsive to what future generations need. *What specifically could you do beginning back in [] that could make a significant difference in your contribution to the well-being of future generations?* Imagine telling at least one person what answer you got to this question.

Now you may imagine that the teacher has ended the history lesson. ... So you return from the daydream that you have been experiencing, and return your attention to the room where you are sitting, ready to write down or to share what you have experienced

Debrief on Part I

Have people form into groups of two; in which each person tells the other the answers to the two questions:

1. What future generations most need from us?
2. What I could do in my own life that would be a significant contribution to the well-being of future generations.

Each person then tells the group what the two answers were of their partner; and the group can reflect on what was learned and what it all means.

PART II: YOUR PERSONAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE SHIFT TO ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

After a short break, the process repeats, this time using a “higher consciousness” entry into the process of mental time travel.

SUGGESTIONS for FACILITATORS

After leading a group using the above script, it is useful to provide enough time for participants to share what they experienced with others in small “buzz groups” of two or three. Surprisingly, this can even be done successfully in a large auditorium with theater-type seating. People are usually quite conducive to sharing their experiences, even with strangers. And if you are interested in collecting data on this, you can have them fill brief survey forms that you give them.

Please note that ethical concerns regarding this type of exercise may exist for some who question the appropriateness of a guided imagery exercise designed to create points of view likely to be quite at variance from the “official” viewpoints currently held by most political leaders. For this reason you may wish to have participants discuss this possibility. *Do participants who have experienced it view this exercise as an “appropriate technology” for use in schools and other social settings? If not, why not? What needs to happen instead?*

Whether or not you have participants share their experiences in small groups, it is useful to provide an opportunity for a few participants to share with the whole audience their answer to such questions as: “*What did you find most surprising in this exercise?*” and, “*What answer did you get to the question: What do future generations most urgently need from us?*”

In order to fully appreciate this exercise, and to be a good facilitator for others, it is necessary first to experience it for yourself. An excellent way to do so is to pre-record it on a cassette tape recorder, and then to play the tape back, experiencing it as a participant, not as a guide. Among other advantages, this will give the inexperienced guide a direct lesson in *timing*, how important it is to read the script slowly, and with what otherwise might seem like overly long spaces of time during which the participants actively imagine, which, after all, is the whole point of the exercise.

It may be worth noting that the above script is based on methods I developed when a futures researcher at the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International) and which I currently teach in a graduate “Visionary Futures” course at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. This script was adapted from a similar guided imagery exercise which I have used dozens of times over the past 20 years with all types of audiences: small and large, from students to professionals, and with all types of education and background. It is easy and safe to use, and often provides participants with a deep-seated change in viewpoint and values that may be characterized as “*global consciousness*.”

I strongly encourage others to create guided imagery exercises on what future generations may need, and the short bibliography, which follows, was selected with this in mind.

A SAMPLE SURVEY FORM

What I Experienced in the Visualization Exercise on “What Future Generations Need from Us”

(When providing this to participants, please re-format the questions to leave ample room for essay-length responses. If you use this sample survey form, or one like it, please share what you learn with the author and/or with the Future Generations Alliance Foundation.

1. The most surprising thing(s) that I experienced in the exercise:
2. Based on what I experienced, the future looks like:
3. The “message” I felt should be sent from the future back to the present regarding what future generations need from us was:
4. Other things I want to say about this exercise:

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bry, A. (with M. Bair) *Visualization: Directing the Movies of Your Mind* (NYC: Harper & Row, 1978).

Galyean, B. *Mind Sight Learning Through Imaging* (Long Beach, CA: Center for Integrative Learning, 1983).

Markley, O. “Mental Time Travel: A Practical Business and Personal Research Tool for Looking Ahead” (*Journal of Futures*, 2007, doi:10.1016/j.futures.2007.06.006).

Markley, O. & S. Burchstead, “Experiencing the Needs of Future Generations with Adults and Children,” *Journal of Futures*, 29 (8) 715-722, 1997.

Markley, O. “Using Depth Intuition Methods for Creative Problem Solving, and Strategic Innovation,” *The Journal of Creative Behavior* (Vol. 22, No. 2, 85-100, 1988). Reprinted as Selection 40 in S. Parnes, Ed., *Source Book for Creative Problem Solving: A Fifty-Year Digest of Proven Innovation Processes* (Buffalo, NY: Creative Education Foundation Press, 1992).

Vaughan, F., *Awakening Intuition*. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1979).

Tough, A. “What Future Generations Need From Us,” *Futures*, December, 1993, pp. 1041-1050.