

Experiencing the Needs of Future Generations:

A Step Toward Global Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

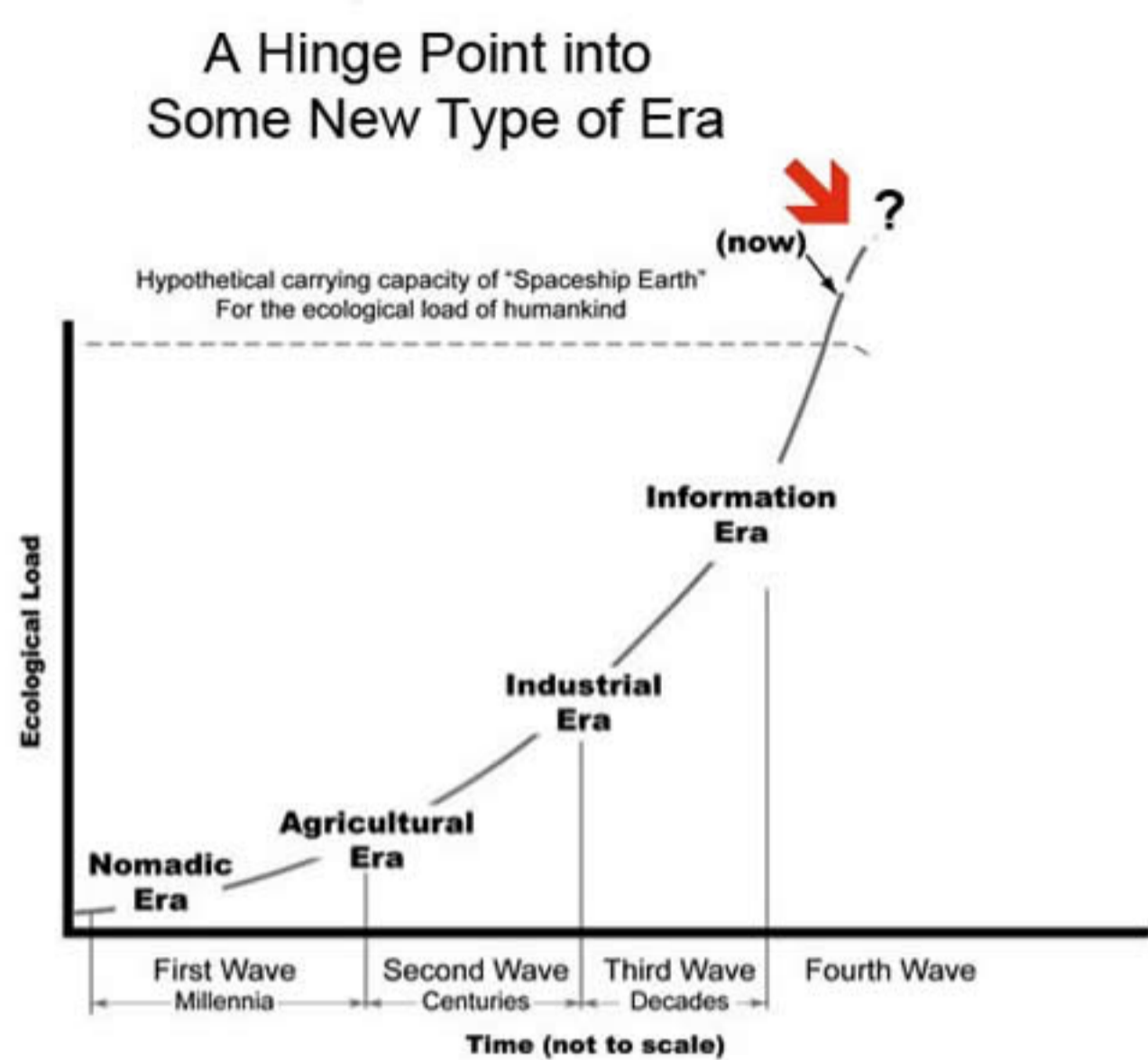
This is an exercise in "visionary futures exploration" - the use of imagination and intuition to discern transformational future possibilities and their implications for present-day values, attitudes, policies and decision making. A "guided cognitive imagery" script is presented which, when read aloud, takes the hearer on a journey to different time periods, both past and future. The journey ends 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." It is recommended that the Future Generations Alliance Foundation help make a multi-media version of this and similar exercises available on the Internet as a way in which many different types of participants could share and discuss their responses. It would be a new and radically participative approach to "future generations" research, communication and education.

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).



The above graph depicts the exponential growth of ecological load across recorded history. If feasible, it is good for participants to consider it before engaging in the guided imagery exercise which follows.

A SCRIPT FOR EXPLORING the PAST and the FUTURE of the HUMAN RACE

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.

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 previous 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, hoping that you will learn something about the management of social change at different times and places on this 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 school room 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?* ...

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?* ... *What does the tribe do for you?* ...

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?* ...

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 in one place indefinitely. But with the coming of modern technologies, the simple ways of traditional village life are giving way to the complexities of large cities.

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 of colonialism are being felt in all parts of the world and traditional indigenous village life is giving way to the ways of industrialized society. Imagine that you are now an elder in a traditional village who is concerned for the future of your people.

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?* ... *What do they do to find the answers they need?* ...

Scene Three: The Short-Range Future - facing "limits to growth"

Your teacher has changed the topic once again, and is now talking about how the spread of advanced technologies all over the world has led to 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.

Your daydream now shifts into the future. In it, you imagine experiencing what things may be like in about one generation - or twenty to thirty years - in the future. *What do you notice first?* ... *What are the main things that attract your attention?* ... Move to the last day of the year, 25 years in the future, and tune in to a TV show that summarized the big events of the year. To the extent that you wish to, imagine really being there at each of the events that you see being reported. *What do you see?* ... *What is now possible due to new technologies?* ... *What progress has been made in dealing with problems such as growth in population, pollution, and so forth?* ... *What do people mainly find important when they consider these types of problems?* ... *What do they do to find the answers they need?* ...

Scene Four: The Long-Range Future - resolving limits to growth

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 ____ (e.g., 2197 - please write this date in the script before leading the exercise with a group). If current forecasts prove at all accurate, this is a time in which things are becoming 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 ____ (date). 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?* ... *What actions by previous generations made things turn out this way?* ... *How do people in this time and place go about guiding what the society is about?* ... *What do they do to find the answers they need?* ...

Imagine now that your daydream shifts very far ahead - to some 2,500 years, or about 100 generations into the future. As you continue to experience your daydream, things may appear very different due to the continued changes stemming from new modes of exploration and learning and living that have taken place over the past 2,500 years. If you could perceive things in all the dimensions that are relevant, *What would you be aware of?* ... *What do you notice first?* ... *As you become aware of yourself here, 2,500 years in the future, what else do you notice?* ... *How are things now most different from what they were like 2,500 years ago?* ... *What is your body like?* ... *What is the world like?* ... *Have you learned about any worlds other than the planet they call Earth?* ... *What are they like?* ... *Does the concept, "Future Generations" mean anything different here than it did back 2,500 years ago, when you were having the daydream of being here now?* ...

Scanning Our History for Patterns

Now imagine that the teacher has ended the lecture on human 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 future*. 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. ... So, recall your experience with:

The Nomadic Tribe - facing climate change ... *The Traditional Village* - facing transition to industrialism and urbanization ... *The Short-Range Future* - one generation, or about 25 years ahead, facing limits to growth ... *The Long-Range Future* - eight generations, or about 200 years ahead, responding to limits to growth ... *The Very Long-Range Future* - 100 generations, or about 2,500 years ahead, possibly beyond currently perceived limits to growth ...

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?* ... 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 and learned just now.

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.

CONCLUSION

I hope that the exercise described in this article will inspire significant increases in global consciousness for participants in all parts of the planet; and that it will also stimulate the creation by other "Visionary Futurists," of their own guided imagery vehicles for "re-visioning" the human future.

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:

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