

FUTUREtakes

Transcultural Futurist Magazine

ISSN 1554-7744

Vol. 8, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2009-2010)

Seven Positive Trends Amidst the Doom and Gloom

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While there is a great deal of bad, indeed, horrendous, news in the world – global warming, terrorism, the global financial crisis, water shortages, worsening inequity – there are also signs of positive change.

GENOMICS

First, in genomics, the revolution of tailoring health advice has begun. Among other websites, www.23andme.com for 400\$ provides detailed personal genetic information to consumers. It provides, “the latest research on how your genes may affect risk for common diseases and conditions such as heart attack, arthritis and cancers.” Once your genome is analyzed, you will also be able to “see your personal history through a new lens with detailed information about your ancient ancestors and comparisons to global populations today.” (www.23andme.com). This development in genomics is good news in that more information about your personal health future is available. Of course, these are just probabilities and should be used wisely, helping each person make better health choices today. Avoiding creating self-fulfilling prophecies of potential future illnesses would be a priority in teaching individuals to understand their genome map. Bringing wisdom to more information is crucial especially given forecasts that within 10 years every baby will be given a complete genome map at birth (<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25030496-2703,00.html>).

MEDITATION

Second, there is positive news in meditation research. Study after study confirms that meditation benefits not only the individual; as national health expenditures keep on increasing (because of increased demand from an ageing population), meditation as part of a national health strategy, along with exercise, low-fat vegetarian food and a close community, can reduce public health costs. For example, we know that studies show that regular meditators exhibit: 87% less heart disease, 55.4% less tumors, 50.2% less hospitalization, 30.6% less mental disorders and 30.4% less infectious diseases (Matthew Bambling, *Mind, Body and Heart, Psychotherapy in Australia*, February 2006, 52-59). There are even reports on the benefits of meditation for military care providers (www.contemplativemind.com), not a sector known for spiritual development. Meditation even changes the nature of the brain. Researchers at Harvard, Yale and

MIT have found that brain scans reveal that experienced meditators boasted increased thickness in parts of the brain that dealt with attention and processing sensory input. The structure of the adult brain can thus change, suggests the research (<http://www.physorg.com/news10312.html>). Indeed, research as well suggests that through meditation we can train ourselves to be more compassionate toward others. It appears that cultivating compassion and kindness through meditation affects brain regions that can make a person more empathetic to other peoples' mental states, say researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (<http://www.news.wisc.edu/14944>)

While we have had anecdotal evidence of the importance of meditation, developments in MRI scanning have taken the research to new levels providing us with visual and repeatable (scientific) evidence.

SPIRITUALITY

Third, we are witnessing a rise in the significance of spirituality as a worldview and as a practice. Spirituality is defined broadly as a practice that brings inner peace and love for self and the transcendent as well as being inclusive of others, that is, it does not claim to be exclusive or in a hierarchy of who is above and who is below. In their book, *The Cultural Creatives* (www.culturalcreatives.org), Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson go so far as to say that up to 25% of those in OECD nations now subscribe to a new worldview with spirituality as a central feature. Over time this worldview will likely have increasingly tangible impacts on economic, transport and governance systems.

In their book, *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1999), Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton found “spirituality as one of the most important determinants of performance.” Of the 200 companies surveyed, sixty percent believed that spirituality was a benefit provided no particular view of religion was pushed.

Georgeanne Lamont's research in the UK at 'soul-friendly' companies – including Happy Computers, Bayer UK, Natwest, Microsoft UK, Scott Bader, Peach Personnel – found lower than average absenteeism, sickness and staff turnover – which saved the businesses money. In one example, Broadway Tyres introduced spiritual practices, and absenteeism dropped from twenty-five/thirty percent to two percent.

And, research shows a positive correlation between spiritual organisations and the bottom line – organisations that can inspire employees to a 'higher cause' tend to have enhanced performance because of the increased motivation and commitment this tends to generate. (<http://www.managementtoday.co.uk/news/603309/organisational-spirituality-fad/>).

HEALTHY AND GREEN CITIES

Fourth, we are seeing that while many problems are too big for national governments, local governance is thriving. Many cities are taking the future to heart. In Australia for example, Future 2030 city projects are slowly becoming part of the norm (Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast, Logan City, for example). Cities are broadening democracy to include visioning. Citizens are asked about their desired image of their city – transport, skyline, design, and community – and are working with political leaders and professional staff to create their desired futures. This not only leads to cities changing in directions citizens authentically prefer but also enhances the capacity of citizens to make a difference. Democracy becomes not only strengthened but the long-term becomes part of decision-making – a type of anticipatory democracy is being created. Those politicians who prefer to keep power to themselves and not engage in the visioning tend to be booted out, suggests some research (Steve Gould, *Creating Alternative Community Futures*. MA thesis, University of the Sunshine Coast, 2009).

And what type of futures do citizens prefer? They tend to want more green (gardens on rooftops, for example), far fewer cars (more public transport), technology embedded in their day-to-day lives – a seamless integration of nature, the built environment and high technologies – and far more community spaces. They want to work from home, and many imagine new community centres where people of different professions can work individually but also share costs (and avoid loneliness). Imagine the savings in transport costs as well as greenhouse gas emissions. And time! Instead of expensive new infrastructure, creating flexible home-work-community-time options could save billions, not to mention no longer being stuck in traffic jams.

On a practical level, solid social science research demonstrates that cities can develop policies that enhance public health. For example in Australia, the Rockhampton 10,000 steps program has attempted to enhance the physical activity of citizens. Given the volumes of epidemiological evidence that show that regular physical activity promotes and improves health in endless ways, active health is a great best buy (<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2002/s665906.htm>).

But it is not just physical health that planners are beginning to consider but psychological health. Research shows that green spaces in a city have a pronounced affect on the emotional health of residents, (<http://www.sciam.com/blog/60-second-science/post.cfm?id=the-green-space-cure-the-psychologi>) and the higher the biodiversity of green spaces, the more benefits. Thus, keeping green spaces helps in promoting physical and mental health. Enhancing green spaces can also reduce drought as there is considerable evidence that the suburban/strip mall model of development blocks billions of gallons of rainwater from seeping through the soil to replenish ground water (Tom Doggett, “Suburban Sprawl Blocks Water, Worsens U.S. Drought,” Aug 28, 2002, www.reuters.com).

As part of this rethinking of the city, planners are starting to see transport alternatives as being linked to community health. For example, we now know that air pollution is linked to heart disease, that is, clogged roads lead to clogged arteries (the amount of time spent in traffic increases the risk of heart disease) (<http://www.businessweek.com/lifestyle/content/healthday/624998.html>). And if they do not design for health, most likely citizens who have been hospitalized will litigate against city officials for not designing cities for well-being.

NEW MEASUREMENTS

Fifth, nations, cities, corporations, and non-governmental organizations are creating new ways of measuring their success. While earlier indicators of progress were all about the dollar, now triple bottom line measurements have taken off and will continue to do so in the future. Instead of measuring only the single bottom line of profit, impacts on nature (sustainability) and on society (social inclusion) are becoming increasingly important, even in this financial crisis. One Australia city has even followed the example of Bhutan and developed a Gross National Happiness index (<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20983056-7583,00.html>).

This enlargement of what counts as the bottom line is occurring because more and more evidence points to the fact that the economy rests on society which rests on nature. All three have to do well for us to survive and thrive, to move toward individual and collective happiness. Focus on one works in the short run, but in the long run having a dynamic balance works best. Even the President of the European Commission, Manuel Barroso, has argued that it is time to go beyond GDP, as this traditional indicator measures only market activity and not well-being. Says Barroso, writing about GDP, “We cannot face the challenges of the future with the tools of the past.” (<http://www.beyond-gdp.eu/download/bgdp-summary-notes.pdf>). Confirming this new approach, Hans-Gert Pöttering, the President of the European Parliament, writes that: “well-being is not just growth; it is also health, environment, spirit and culture.”

(<http://www.beyond-gdp.eu/download/bgdp-summary-notes.pdf>). There are now even calls for spirituality to become the fourth bottom line (http://www.metafuture.org/Articles/spirituality_bottom_line.htm).

PEER-TO-PEER AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

Sixth, while there are many benefits of the Information and Communication Technologies revolution, one of the key positive outcomes is the development of peer-to-peer power (www.p2pfoundation.net). Traditional hierarchical relations – top down models of relating to each other – are being challenged. And while it is far too early to say the dominator model of social relations will disappear in this generation, slowly over time there are indications that there will be far more balance in emerging futures. Hierarchy will become only one of the ways we engage with each other; the role of partnerships (through cooperatives) will continue to increase as new social technologies via the web make that possible. For example, already Wikipedia has challenged traditional modes of knowledge authority. Websites such as kiva.org allow – though at a small level – direct person to person lending. This could have dramatic impacts on the big banks over time. Social peer-to-peer networking also reduces the ability of authoritarian states to use information communication technologies for surveillance benefits. Power moves from rigid hierarchies to far more fluid and socially inventive networks.

With more information available exponentially, the challenge will be to use information about our genome, our inner lives, and our localities in ways that empower and create harmony. New technologies such as the bodybugg and overtime health and eco-bots will help a great deal as they will give us immediate, interactive and tailored information on the futures we wish for (as does the newly invented smart toilet with its likely web links to health providers <http://www.oprah.com/article/oprahshow/20090305-tows-oz-live-longer/7> -). Health and eco-bots will be able to help us decide which products to buy (do they fit into my value structure, are they triple or quadruple bottom line), how much and how long to exercise and through social networking, enlist communities of support to help achieve desired futures.

HAPPINESS IS VIRAL

Seventh, finally, all the good news is infectious. Harvard social scientist Nicholas Christakis and his political-science colleague James Fowler at the University of California at San Diego argue “that emotions can pass among a network of people up to three degrees of separation away, so your joy may be [partly] determined by how cheerful your friends' friends are, even if some of the people in this chain are total strangers to you.” This means that health and happiness is not just created by individual behavior but by how they feed into the larger social network (Alice Park, “The Happiness Effect,” *Time*, Dec. 11, 2008). Happiness can be seen as viral. What the Indian mystic P.R. Sarkar has called as the Microvita Effect (www.proutcollege.org, www.ru.org).

All this does not mean we should dismiss attempts to transform social injustice, but we need to appreciate how far we have come and focus on ways to improve material, intellectual and spiritual reality. Positive steps forward can create more positive futures, for individuals and for societies.

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Indian Philosophy. Internationally, among other groups, Professor Inayatullah has presented to the European Commission, UNESCO, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, APEC, the Thai Capital Markets Academy, the Ministry of Trade and Investment of the Singapore government, the Ministry of Education of the Malaysian government, the European Academic Cooperation Association, University Sains Malaysia, and Ministries of other governments. In Australia, along with presentations to local, state and federal departments of government he has conducted futures workshops for dozens of educational organizations and corporations. He can be contacted at s.inayatullah@qut.edu.au and his Web site is www.metafuture.org.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *One might expect Iyanatullah's discussion of healthy and green cities, meditation, and spirituality to appeal to people who are interested in simpler lifestyles. Other contemporary developments suggest that society and everyday life are becoming more complex. With these points in mind, indicate whether everyday life will be simpler or more complex in your part of the world in 2020, and support your argument.*
- *Iyanatullah observes that citizens want fewer cars and more public transport. At the same time, the automobile is associated with freedom in various parts of the world, especially in the US. Indeed, it has given people the freedom to live in one place and work in another (and by some accounts has led to the decline of many "company towns"); however, by other accounts it has imposed a time-consuming slavery of its own. What changes can you foresee in living and working patterns, and what will be the "drivers" (pun intended) and enablers?*
- *In his "new measurements" section, Iyanatullah observes that nations, cities, corporations, and non-government organizations are creating new ways to measure success – ways that extend to impacts on nature, to social impacts, and even to a Gross National Happiness index. In what ways can these new measurements be incorporated into a next-generation utility function? Also, which aspects of happiness are universal and which are culture-specific – and of these aspects, which will prevail in your part of the world in 2020?*
- *Envisions Iyanatullah, "Power moves from rigid hierarchies to far more fluid and socially inventive networks." In what ways will this power shift manifest in various entities that are commonly regarded as hierarchical – for example, governments, corporations (including factories), healthcare entities and systems, the judiciary, and educational institutions?*
- *"Peer-to-peer power" is challenging hierarchical models of human interaction, as Iyanatullah and others have pointed out. A concurrent development, also supported by new communications technologies, is the increasing superficiality in communications and indeed in friendships. How different will friendships and social interactions be in 2015 from what they are today, and why?*
- *As Iyanatullah states, local governance is thriving even as some challenges are too big for national governments. Is the long-term trend toward local governance or toward larger supranational or transnational governing entities? In other words, will it be "fission" or "fusion"?*

- *Iyanatullah discusses the increased interest in and significance of spirituality, and he cites research that demonstrates the positive impact of spirituality on both individual and organizational performance. Characterize the net effect of the following factors on the acceptance of spirituality as a worldview:*
 - *Persistence of the instant gratification mindset, the focus on diversion and entertainment, and economies based in part on the perpetual creation and satiation of dissatisfaction – vs. disillusionment with this type of lifestyle*
 - *An explosive rate of change that puts at risk one's safety nets (employment, retirement, lifestyle, social networks) and sense of identity; loss of stable reference points*
 - *The pace of "life" – disposable time or lack thereof, and impact on one's time for introspection (contrast with lifestyles of earlier eras extending back to the hunter-gatherer days)*
 - *People's places on Maslow's hierarchy of needs – in the extremes, the survivalist level vs. the self-actualization and fulfillment level*
 - *Culture-specific factors*

