

I first heard about the World Future Society through Don Beck's Spiral Dynamics online newsletter, in which he encourages his readers to check out the organization. I was impressed enough to join and register for the next conference, which at that time was nearly a year away.

I felt a little trepidation about attending the WFS conference without knowing a single soul who had even heard of the group.

But my curiosity was piqued: My formal background is physics, business, and dreams; my informal background is music, Jungian psychology and shamanism. So my overarching interest concerns the evolution of consciousness and whether or how personal and collective actions or incidents impact consciousness; also, how consciousness manifests reality. Furthermore, as an employee of the defense industry, I'm interested in how consciousness is impacted for better or worse by our approach to defense. I was especially curious to see the various ways these topics might be addressed over the course of the weekend.

It was a jam-packed couple days, and of course I couldn't possibly attend more than a few sessions, and I now have many more questions than before – surely a sign of a successful trip. I also have many more clues and resources to explore and I met some great people engaged in extraordinary projects many of whom I hope to get to know over the next few years.

I hope you can take a moment to check out the conference program schedule and speakers. This year, for the first time ever, the plan is to make the presentations available on line (though there's nothing up yet).

I named the presentations I attended below, not in any particular order, and I offer a few of my impressions of what were for me, the conference highlights.

Twenty-first Century Foresight Tools, Trends, and Projections for National Security, International Stability and Governance

I decided beforehand that I wanted to meet one of the presenters of this session, Jim Burke, because he works for Northrup-Grumman in a group called Futures, Forecasting, and Change Management.

Jim presented on a panel along with Sheila Ronis, Leon Fuerth, who was Al Gore's national security adviser, and John Meagher, who works for Jim at N-G. Each presented different aspects of how they were working issues of national security. Leon Fuerth is the originator of the Project on Forward Engagement, which encourages applying systems thinking to long range issues in government.

After Dr. Sheila Ronis mentioned "Deming" and "systems thinking" I wondered if by any chance she might know Bill Bellows. Sure enough, she told me she was responsible for the August Thought Piece! Dr. Deming was her mentor for many years.

If you called into the monthly teleconference a couple weeks ago, you have an idea of what Sheila presented in terms of her work with The Project on National Security Reform (PNSR). All of the panel members also support Sheila on her project.

This was an excellent first session as it was where I met some of my favorite people of the conference and has yielded new contacts and great new information, new arenas to explore. Through subsequent email correspondence, John Meagher introduced me to another interesting group, Social Technologies, Inc. They are doing some very interesting work – especially take a look at their chart on time cycles from 1750. To my delight, I kept running into Sheila, Jim and John at subsequent sessions underscoring the similarity of our interests.

The Future Evolution of Humanity, Consciousness, and the Human Mind

This session was moderated by Linda Groff and Tom Lombardo, neither of whom I met personally unfortunately. Linda Groff began with an observation that there were two broad categorizations appearing within the WFS group (or something to this effect): Whether consciousness is an emergent property of physical and biological evolution or if it is a primary property of existence.

This caught my attention. The trans-humanists fall in the prior category, while I put myself in the latter camp, believing that consciousness precedes being, not the other way around. In fact, Groff's statement echoed my already forming impressions of the conference presentations so far. I knew that Ray Kurzweil was a guest speaker at the conference in 2007, though I had not yet read any of his books. Many of you In2Thinkers are likely familiar with transhumanism, but it is a new arena for me. I did just receive a copy of Kurzweil's "The Singularity is Near" and am looking forward to diving in. The "singularity" refers to the point at which technology's artificial intelligence surpasses human intelligence resulting in tremendous (unprecedented) progress in technology. I'd be interested to hear from any of you who are already familiar with these ideas!

Tom Lombardo shared a fairly comprehensive slide show featuring the role psychology can play in apprehending future consciousness. He even had Carl Jung up there on one of his slides but to my surprise did not seem to know much about him, lumping him in with Freud as outmoded and irrelevant.

It got me thinking that the approaches to consciousness outlined by Lombardo would be much enhanced by a model that includes the unconscious and a relationship between the individual and the collective unconscious. So perhaps there's an opportunity of sorts to provide some clearer application of Jungian ideas in the arena of future consciousness.

I would recommend checking out Tom Lombardo's website which nevertheless has a great deal of helpful information on it and many interesting articles on the value of reflection and non-linear approaches to developing future consciousness.

The Fourth Wave: The Transhuman Revolution, From Humans to Posthumans

Presented by Jose Luis Cordeiro, founder of the Venezuelan Chapter of WFS and currently residing in Japan, this was a lively and entertaining presentation of the next link in human evolution in terms of future technological advancements and their impact to humans, where illnesses and handicaps can be modified through intelligent technologies, ala the bionic man (also addressed in Kurzweil's books).

I tend to associate trans-humanistic thought with the idea that consciousness is limited to the physical brain – a position I feel has been called into question by the research of Rupert Sheldrake and others. But I haven't looked into the issue more than this so am willing to suspend judgment for the time being.

And anyway, Cordeiro's presentation was engaging and compelling. One fascinating prediction was that efforts to map the brain would be completed sooner than originally expected, similar to the rapidity with which the human genome project progressed. Estimates place the milestone of developing a completely computerized brain in forty years! Are you slow-witted or forgetful? No worries, you can get a new brain!

Since I a) think that consciousness precedes being and b) believe that consciousness is not limited to the physical brain, I can't help but wonder how this will work.

Systems theory posits that behavior emerges out of structure, so perhaps there is a minimum condition for the complexity of a neural network that when developed, gives rise to consciousness-like behavior. Complete with the requisite connections to the collective unconscious. Could be possible I suppose.

I took some issue with Cordeiro's ideas of consciousness as it manifests (or doesn't) in animals – he said he doesn't believe any animals, including higher primates (excluding man of course) are capable of self-consciousness – which makes it sound as though he doesn't know any animals personally, or has never heard of Koko the gorilla. I could be wrong. Regardless, I gained a whole new arena to research!

New Eyes, New Lenses, and a New Palestine: A Spiral Dynamics Perspective on Cultural Emergence and Nation-Building

Don Beck is apparently a conference regular and the only person I knew beforehand. He now presents with his partner Elza Maalouf who in my humble opinion adds considerably to his presentation, balancing out his already excellent material with the perspective of a woman and also someone from the Middle East. Although I've seen this basic presentation before, I was impressed with the depth that has developed around the concepts, especially as they continue to teach others how to use the model in trouble spots like the Middle East. They have been training a growing cadre of spiral dynamics thinkers in key areas of conflict around the world.

Complex Adaptive Systems and Futures Thinking: Theories, Applications, and Methods

This too was a panel discussion with Linda Groff, Rima Shaffer and about three others who unfortunately were not identified on the program and since I came into the session late, I did not get their names.

But the main thrust of the discussion focused on using systems approaches to better understanding the complexities of our world and naturally led to exploring how complex systems can have radical consequences which require non-linear approaches and solutions. Unfortunately, for much of the discussion I heard, the panel seemed to get waylaid around a key aspect of systems theory: how the behavior of the system emerges out of the system's structure. Since I missed the initial part of the discussion, I did not know to what the issue referred.

But the best thing to come out of attendance in this session is that one of the unlisted panel members happened to sit by me at lunch so I had the distinct pleasure of speaking with Michael Marien, the founder and editor of Future Survey journal who was honored at the end of the conference with a distinguished service award. I did not know any of this at lunch and since I had to leave early, missed his receiving the award as well. But he has kindly been corresponding with me since the conference via email, and I've asked him some questions about the history of WFS.

Here is some of what he has shared with me about the early days and the nature of the WFS.

- Definition of a futurist: "A futurist is someone who calls himself or herself a futurist, or is seen as such." If I'm considered a futurist, then I am one!
- Misfits are the best candidates (for WFS membership), and the number is limited (in response to my claim of often feeling misfit!)
- About a quarter of attendees at any given conference are primary futurists ("professional futurists" are a sub-set), a third or more are secondary, and a third are non-futurists
- WFS membership is one-quarter the size it used to be at its peak in 1980
- The WFS was more earnest and exciting, in its early years in the 1970s
- The biggest conference took place in 1980 in Toronto, with 5500 attendees and 1150 presenters;
 - WFS used to sell t-shirts, had a press room for presenters, and had far more displays – just to give an idea of how big an event it used to be
 - The WFS isn't alone in this decline – the Canadian Association for Futures Studies also experienced terrific conferences in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but went defunct in the mid-80s
 - The decline is due to because of broader cultural trends and inability of leadership to maintain the momentum of the 1970s

Thoughts on the 2008 World Future Conference
By Cynthia Cavalli

While the 2008 conference was much smaller, with about 1000 people in attendance (my guesstimate), a show of hands indicated that the majority of attendees were there for the first time, a promising development.

Michael Marien will be retiring at the end of this year from his long successful run editing Future Survey. His successor has not yet been selected. However, if you have any interest in keeping an eye on serious futures issues, perhaps you will consider using Future Survey, which offers a more in-depth perspective than Futures, the WFS magazine. He shared some articles with me that I will make available to Bill to share with all of you.

A couple things that struck me:

- I have often felt like a misfit wherever I am in life – perhaps the same is true for some of you. I was surprised to find that apparently this is very common to the kind of people attracted to futures work – nearly everyone I spoke with mentioned feeling this way (and not in response to prodding on my part!).
- If you peruse TED, you will find some of the futurists who have presented at WFS conferences in the past. This is an interesting, dynamic and well-connected group of individuals not especially interested in fame or glory, but of pursuing their passion for the future.

I hope that some of you will consider joining this worthy organization. I was pleased to find such a well-educated, informed group of interested, interesting, passionate people dedicated to changing the world – not so unlike the members of In2Thinking!

In closing, I'd like to share a quote I found by Robert Frost which reflects my feelings about the future – and I'm sure are those of others as well.

*Towards the end of his life someone asked Robert Frost,
"Do you have hope for the future?"
"Yes," he replied, "and even for the past, that it will turn out to have been all right for what it was, something we can accept, mistakes made by the selves we had to be, not able to be, perhaps, what we wished, or what looking back half the time it seems we could so easily have been, or ought. ... The future, yes, and even for the past, that it will become something we can bear."* (<http://www.mythicjourneys.org/>)

More information (in no particular order):

Organization site: www.wfs.org

Opening plenary speaker Edie Weiner: <http://www.weineredrichbrown.com/weiner-bio.html>

Opening plenary speaker Bill Drayton: <http://www.ashoka.org/>

Tom Lombardo's website: <http://www.centerforfutureconsciousness.com/>

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Don Beck and Spiral Dynamics: <http://www.spiraldynamics.net/>,
<http://humanemergence.org/>

The Sante Fe Institute: <http://santafe.edu/>

Social Technologies: <http://www.socialtechnologies.com/>

Sheila Ronis: <http://www.lifeboat.com/ex/bios.sheila.r.ronis>

Leon Fuerth: <http://www.forwardengagement.org/>

Jose Cordeiro: <http://www.cordeiro.org/>,

<http://www.lifeboat.com/ex/bios.jose.luis.cordeiro>