

Futuring

The Exploration of the Future

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Explorers of the Future

We are all time travelers on a journey into the future. However, we are not tourists accompanied by a guide who can tell us just what lies ahead and will keep us safe and comfortable. Instead, we are explorers in an unknown and dangerous region that no one has ever seen before us.

Our fellow explorers express many different opinions about what lies ahead. Some of them foresee a marvelous paradise—a time filled with wonderful new technologies that will keep us all well-fed, healthy, and happy. Others among us warn of doom in one form or another: an ecological catastrophe, a new ice age, a collision with a comet, or any of an endless variety of other threats, some more plausible than others.

In our personal lives, we become keenly aware of the unknown in our future when we start college, take a new job, open a business, or move to a new town. We never can be sure what will happen to us, but the great explorers of the past would advise us that we have a better chance of succeeding if we prepare ourselves as well as possible.

The explorers who ventured into Earth's once-unknown regions have a lot to teach us about how to face the unknown. Like us today, the great explorers heard many different opinions of what to expect in the unknown regions they were entering: Pessimists warned of monsters and dragons; optimists imagined cities of gold and fountains of youth.

Though those explorers are not here to advise us personally, we have accounts of their expeditions, and from these we can deduce the lessons they would have offered for our journey into the unknown future.

The Lessons of the Great Explorers

Reading accounts of great expeditions, we notice that the explorers prepared very carefully for their journeys. Their success depended on having the right equipment, the right supplies, the right teammates, and the right training at the moment of need.

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So the first lesson of the great explorers is: *Prepare for what you will face in the future.* Lack of preparation invites disaster. That may seem obvious, yet many people today see no point in preparing or even thinking about the future. "Let's not worry about the future until we get to it," they say. The great explorers would have no use for such a person: Only a reckless fool would imagine that problems will sit patiently waiting until we find it convenient to receive them. Quite to the contrary, problems may rush upon us at the worst possible moment, and our very survival can depend on how well we have prepared for them.

Good preparation can work for us today as we plan how to cope with what we have to face. The well-prepared student does well on examinations; the well-prepared job applicant gets hired. Most of us may think we have learned this lesson long ago, but we often seem to forget. The great explorers knew that forgetting *anything* in their preparations could be fatal.

A second lesson is implied by the first: *Anticipate future needs.* The great explorers took great pains to identify their likely future needs so they could know what to prepare for. They knew that if they failed to anticipate future needs the consequence might be fatal. So they tried to envision long before their expedition's departure all the different situations they might encounter. Today, as explorers of the future, we also need to anticipate what we may face so that we can be ready for it.

But how can we predict our future needs when we are going into the unknown? The great explorers faced the same dilemma, and they used their common sense to deal with it. They recognized that the "unknown" region was not *absolutely* unknown: Something was known about the area close to the unknown regions, and there were vague reports, rumors, educated guesses, and speculation about what lay in the blank areas of the map. The information might be very vague and untrustworthy, but the great explorers used it if they had nothing better.

Any map that might be relevant was treasured, however crude it might be. Meriwether Lewis, secretary to U.S. President Thomas Jefferson, prepared for the famed Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-06) by studying every available map of the Missouri River frontier; Lewis even interrogated one of the map makers to glean whatever bits of hearsay might not be reflected on the map. At the time, maps had almost no information about

most of the territory that the expedition would be exploring, but whatever there was, Lewis got it. By the time the expedition set out, he knew all there was to know about the Missouri River and what lay to the west of it. This error-prone knowledge enabled Lewis to make excellent preparations for the journey, with the result that the Lewis and Clark expedition became one of the great triumphs of American history.

So the third lesson of the great explorers is this: *Use poor information when necessary*. Obviously, we want to use the best available, but when required to make decisions we must not disdain information just because it may not be adequately detailed or may contain errors. Sea captains during the Renaissance sailed around the world using maps that were not only crude but fanciful. The great explorers knew that when you are lost any sort of map may be a godsend.

Many people today think that we can know nothing about the future. They are 99.999++ percent right in the literal sense, but quite wrong in the practical sense: Almost everything we don't know about the future has little practical importance to us, whereas the little that we can know is extremely important, because it can help us make better decisions. Our business with the future is to improve it, not to predict it—at least not infallibly.

We explorers of the future must be practical and realistic. For our expedition to succeed, we must make the most of whatever knowledge we can acquire about what lies ahead. We can't afford to be ivory-tower perfectionists, insisting that information about the future be absolutely precise and accurate, laboratory tested, peer reviewed, and certified by a report approved by a blue-ribbon committee of geniuses. Imperfect knowledge can still provide highly useful guidance for our careers, our businesses, and our investments. It can even save our lives: Millions of people are alive and well today because they learned that they would likely suffer and die if they continued to smoke; armed with that knowledge, they forced themselves to stop smoking. Those foresighted individuals acted on the basis of imperfect evidence. Waiting for additional proof has already cost other millions of people their lives.

Using imperfect knowledge of the future can be essential if we are to act while events are still fluid—before they have hardened into realities that cannot be changed. As General Colin Powell once said, “If you can tell me with a hundred

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percent certainty that we are going to be bombed, it is too late for me to do anything about it.”

Inventing the Future

Even the best-prepared explorers encounter problems that they are not prepared for or that are inevitable risks of their ventures. For the great explorers of the past, the weather was often the main risk. In 1914, the polar explorer Ernest Shackleton set out to cross the Antarctic continent, but his ship became trapped in ice and drifted for ten months before being crushed by the pack ice. At that point, the expedition was a total failure, and Shackleton was trapped in a seemingly hopeless situation. But with stunning resourcefulness, Shackleton managed to keep his men’s hopes alive while he and five others sailed 800 miles to the island of South Georgia to get help. His success in saving every one of his men made him an “explorer’s explorer,” honored for successfully devising and executing an extraordinary Plan B when Plan A had failed.

So we have a fourth lesson from the great explorers: *Expect the unexpected*. An unexpected event is not necessarily bad; it may be a great opportunity. But in either case we want to be ready to deal with it effectively. Many young people today prepare for a career, but not for a career disaster or an unusual opportunity outside their expected career path. Out of the blue, they might be offered a job doing something very exciting in another country. Or they might unexpectedly lose a job and not have any idea what to do next.

In the early 2000s, almost all telecommunications and Internet corporations collapsed or downsized radically, so thousands of workers accustomed to high-paying jobs found themselves with no paycheck but big mortgages and children to feed. The newly unemployed desperately needed to replace their lost income, but they could no longer get jobs in their depressed industries. Many of these people had never anticipated being in such a predicament, and they had no idea what to do next.

In any such crisis, it helps to have resources—both tangible and intangible. Tangible resources include our physical possessions—clothing, automobile, etc.—plus any financial assets that can be used to acquire physical assets. Intangible assets include our experience, skills, and attitudes, as well as our networks of colleagues, friends, and relatives. In Shackleton’s desperate ordeal, the bond between him and his men proved to be a

priceless intangible asset. For us today, our reputation for trustworthy dealings with our creditors and associates can be an important intangible asset.

Other intangible resources that can help us deal with the unexpected include a good understanding of our changing world, intellectual tools for thinking ahead, and methods for assessing our options. These resources help us to cope with the unexpected because they enable us to think more knowledgeably and creatively about our options. If we work to develop these tools, we will have acquired useful skills for coping with unexpected challenges.

Gaining Power Over the Future

The fifth lesson of the great explorers is: *Think long term as well as short term.* For the great explorers, many years might pass between their first dream of leading an expedition and their return home. Columbus spent years traveling from city to city trying to get funding for his expedition across the Atlantic. During those years, he often had little to sustain him except his own vision of what could be accomplished. He faced one rejection after another before Queen Isabella finally provided the money.

Foresight empowers us for future achievements, and foresight that extends well into the future can be especially empowering because we can do so much if we work for years toward a distant goal. Over time, an acorn can grow into an oak, and an infant can grow into an adult human, but there is no way to do either overnight. On the other hand, near miracles can be accomplished if we have a long-term goal and keep working at it. And “long term” does not have to mean a thousand years from now. Extraordinary things can be achieved in a remarkably short time.

“Almost *anything* can be done in twenty years!” asserts Earl C. Joseph, a systems scientist and thinker. His statement may seem like a wild exaggeration, but consider this: From the moment that President Franklin Roosevelt gave the order to build the first atomic bombs, it took only four years to do it, even though it had never been done before and many experts *insisted* that the task was impossible. When President John F. Kennedy ordered NASA to put a man on the moon, it was done in only eight years. In each case, the U.S. government decided to do something extraordinary that had never been done before.

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The goal was envisioned and judged feasible and desirable, strategies and plans were carefully developed, and the project was executed through intense effort. Both projects required careful studies of technological capabilities and the development of a clear vision of something important that might actually be achieved. After that, things were done that astounded the world.

You don't have to be a government to achieve a remarkable feat, but you do generally need to think and work on it for a substantial period of time. This requires envisioning a goal that you are willing to work for a long time to achieve. Alan Hald, a young Arizona banker, envisioned a new goal for himself in 1975 while attending a World Future Society conference. At the meeting, he encountered the editor of a new magazine for computer hobbyists. At the time, nobody but governments and big businesses could afford to build a computer, but that situation was about to change drastically, and Hald suddenly had a vision of the future of computers. He returned to Arizona in great excitement to talk to his partner about starting a business in computers. With that vision and lots of determination to realize it, their business (MicroAge) grew into America's largest microcomputer distributor, serving dealers around the world.

About the same time, Bill Gates and Paul Allen also developed a vision of the future of computers, which led them to business success. Within twenty years of developing their vision, they had become two of the richest men in the world.

Hald, Gates, and Allen thus joined Christopher Columbus, Meriwether Lewis, and Ernest Shackleton in demonstrating the power of having a long-term perspective on the future. If we are thinking long term rather than short term, we can be much more productive, and the eventual results of our efforts can be extraordinary.

Productive Dreaming

Thinking long term is easier if you have a dream to sustain you; in fact, it may be difficult not to slog through years of unrewarded labor and discouragement without a vision. And that brings us to the sixth lesson of the great explorers: *Dream productively.*

The great explorers were basically *doers*, not armchair adventurers fantasizing about great deeds. What counted with them was the actual achievement of their visions. Dreaming or

fantasizing was a means to that end. The great explorers dreamed their ships across the seas long before sailing them. In their imaginations, they tested their mettle against snake-infested jungles, blazing-hot deserts, cruel mountains, and merciless ice floes. By exploring future possibilities in their imagination, they could anticipate their future needs realistically and prepare for what lay ahead of them. This was *productive* dreaming—one type of futuring.

For the great explorers, dreaming was not idle reverie but research—a mental exploration of what lay ahead. By fantasizing about future events, they could explore alternative goals and strategies and thus develop and select *worthwhile and achievable goals, as well as imaginative but realistic strategies for reaching the goals they selected.*

In productive dreaming, ends and means tend to be considered together: If you want to achieve something, you need a valid strategy for getting it. Likewise, if you cannot devise a reasonable strategy for getting to a certain goal, you probably should consider a different goal. Why choose to fail?

The trick of dreaming is not to get lost in idle reverie but to think creatively about the future and what we can do to accomplish worthwhile goals. Once we have a valid and compelling vision of what we want to achieve and how it can be done, we can focus on converting the dream into reality.

Setting Out on Our Expedition

The seventh and last lesson of the great explorers is: *Learn from your predecessors.* The great explorers always wanted to learn about previous expeditions in order to know how to mount their own and avoid the errors made by others. We can never succeed if we have to make every mistake for ourselves. For that reason, this book about the future puts heavy emphasis on what we can learn from the past.

Now, here they are, the seven lessons of the great explorers:

- Prepare for what you will face in the future.
- Anticipate future needs.
- Use poor information when necessary.
- Expect the unexpected.
- Think long term as well as short term.
- Dream productively.
- Learn from your predecessors.

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Why are these lessons so imperative at just this moment in history? Because, as we will discover in the next chapter, we are poised on the edge of the greatest transformation that humanity has yet had to face.

Praise for
Futuring: The Exploration of the Future

“The best general introduction to futures studies by far.”

Michael Marien, editor, *Future Survey*

“This book could not come at a better time. Assisted by the promises and perils of a revolution in technology, globalization, and other historic upheavals, the world badly needs this trove of wisdom Edward Cornish has cultivated over a long career. *Futuring* will equip us all for the challenges ahead.”

William E. Halal, professor of management, George Washington University; author, *21st Century Economics*

“*Futuring* is magnificent... An engrossing and important book...Read it. It could change your future.”

Wendell Bell, Yale sociology professor; author, *Foundations of Futures Studies*

“I really enjoyed reading the book and find it a constant source of interest and information.”

Thomas S. Foley, former Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives

“*Futuring* by Edward Cornish is recommended...The book is an insightful introduction to the art and science of the future... Students are highly encouraged to become acquainted with the content of this book.”

Felipe Korzenny, professor of marketing, Florida State University

“My Picks of the Month. The importance of getting a handle on the future, particularly each of our own personal futures is the subject of *Futuring: The Exploration of the Future* by Edward Cornish ... Those who enjoy personal success in life are just as often those who have peered into the future and made good decisions for themselves. This book offers a guide to how anyone can do this, while exploring many of the trends that are shaping the future... Each of its chapters provides useful information about how to understand and take advantage of change and how to understand how the past affects it. I'd recommend this book to anyone who is serious about their life and how it will play out in the future.”

Alan Caruba in *Book Views*

“The book is outstanding...I will share [it] with friends and colleagues. I especially liked chapter three and the last chapter.”

David Pimentel, professor, Cornell University

“I am VERY pleased. The book is a major contribution to the field, and it will be turned to and learned from for many years to come.... (It's a) strong contribution to the art of shaping a finer future.”

Arthur B. Shostak, professor of sociology, Drexel University

“When (*Futuring*) arrived in the mail, I instantly took a couple of hours to browse through it, and found it to be a superlative product...it will be in ultra-regular use by myself and my research associate.”

Norman Myers, ecologist, author of *Gaia Atlas of Planet Management*,
Oxford, England.

“I can’t imagine how anyone could presume to teach a course in future studies, or engage in any professional activity that involves disciplined thinking about the future, without this book. It is an indispensable resource—one to be not only read but consulted many times over—by a respected pioneer in the field.”

Walter Truett Anderson, president, World Academy of Art and Science

“A very valuable addition to the literature.”

Theodore Gordon, retired president, The Futures Group

“*Futuring* is a comprehensive, skillfully assembled, eminently readable survey that should be useful to anyone seeking an overview of futures studies. Highly recommended.... I will definitely adopt this book for my class.”

Peter Bishop, professor, University of Houston at Clear Lake

“*Futuring* ... is a sensible, down-to-earth, and thoroughly updated survey of the futurist enterprise....

For anyone who wants to know what futures studies are all about in their larger context, here is a practical guide, free of hype and jargon, that tells the whole story....

Ed’s new book will be a significant milestone in the history of futures thinking.”

W. Warren Wagar, professor of history emeritus,
State University of New York at Binghamton

“*[Futuring]* is important, highly useful, and makes for compelling reading.”

Perry Pascarella, Penton Publishing; former editor, *Industry Week*

“I regard your book as a modern classic.”

Ikram Azam, president, Pakistan Futuristics Institute

“Congratulations on a worthwhile job done excellently.”

Olaf Helmer, former president, Institute for the Future

“This book is a thoughtful, comprehensive overview of the futures field whose lucidity and readability may belie the skillful synthesis that it represents.”

Robert M. de Voursney, professor, University of Virginia

“A super job. The book is clear, straightforward and rational. Most important, it is reassuring.”

Arnold Brown, president, Weiner, Edrich, Brown, New York City

“This should be required reading for every professional manager and political candidate.”

Jim Burke, senior futures analyst, Northrop Grumman, Rosslyn, Virginia

“I am very enthusiastic about Ed’s book. It’s a great contribution to the futures literature. *Futuring* is filled with important cutting-edge ideas, yet it is pleasant and easy to read.”

Allen Tough, professor, author of *Crucial Questions About the Future*