

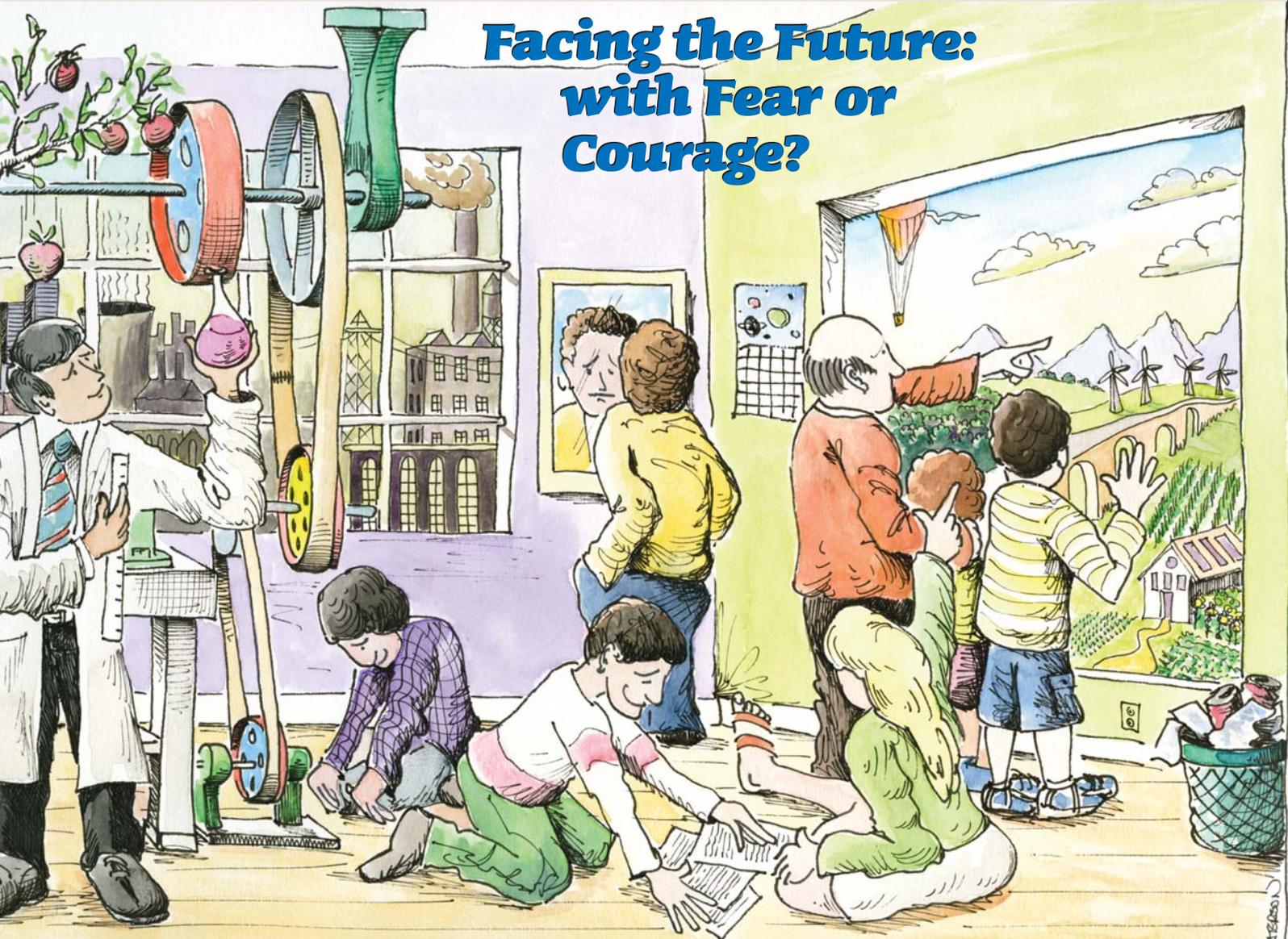
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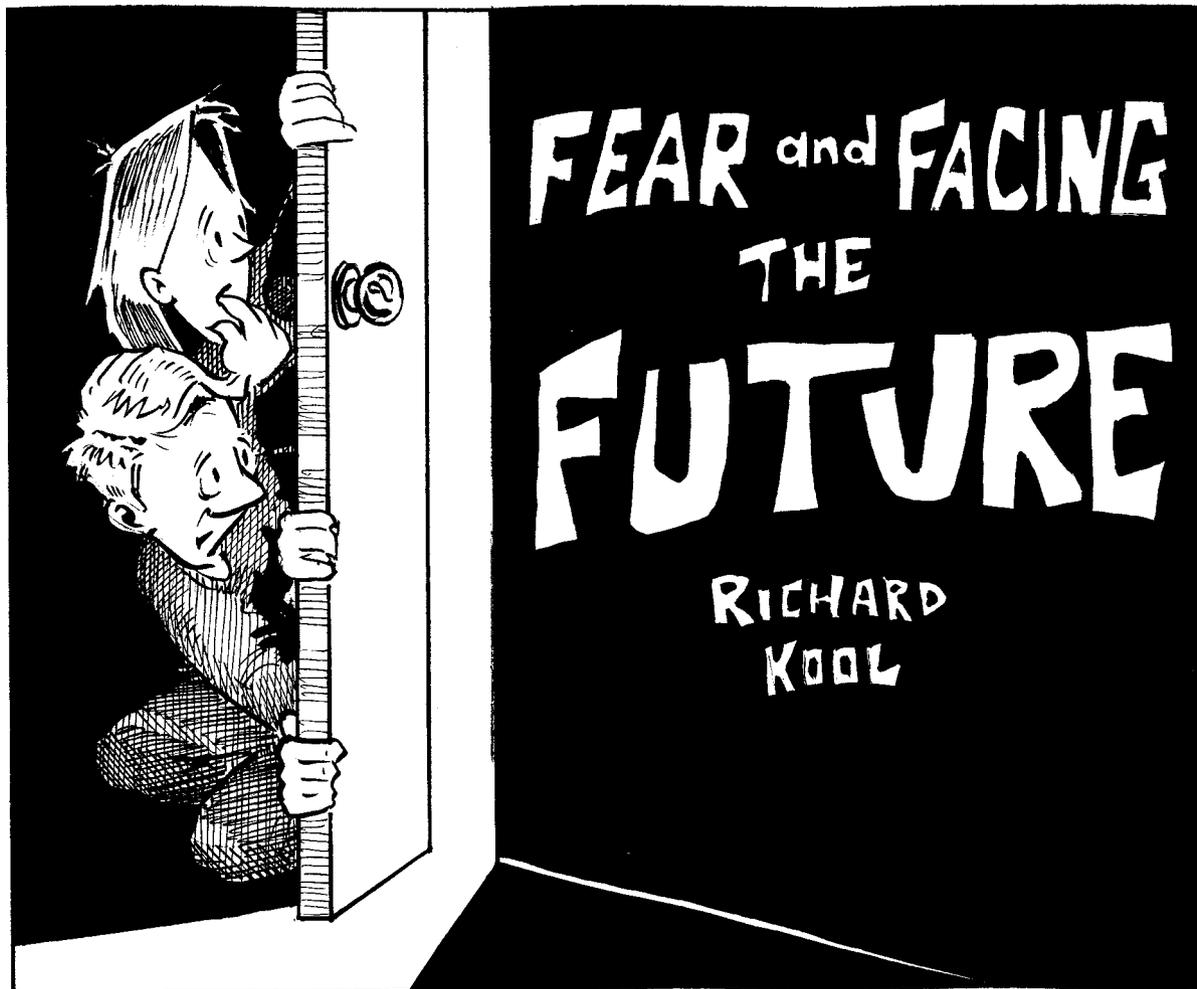


## Facing the Future: with Fear or Courage?



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“THESE ARE THE TIMES that try men’s souls,” wrote the American patriot Thomas Paine in the dark December of 1776 when it was uncertain whether the American Revolution would succeed. In J.R.R. Tolkein’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo expresses the same feeling:

*Frodo:* I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.

*Gandalf:* So do all that come to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

Each generation has to face the challenge of living in an imperfect world not of their making, and to face their fears about the future that will be left to their children. Yet in many ways, the near-future looms significantly in the lives of both students and teachers. We are confronted daily with stories about economic turmoil and the potential for widespread economic chaos, about the possibilities of pandemic disease, about increasingly unpredictable and even catastrophic weather, about species and habitat loss and extinctions. Of course, none of this is certain: we can’t know the future. But from one grim prognosis to another, the future appears to be risky, and we as educators need to be able to consider how we talk with our students about the world that they will inhabit.

### The past, present and the future

For most of humankind’s existence, people have lived in a technologically simpler world governed by traditional values and ways of living—a world in which concepts of economic growth, of technological progress, and of a future radically different from the present were likely not known or much worried about. Whereas we perceive change to be a constant, one can imagine that for most of human history, relative stasis was the norm in a world governed by the rhythms of the earth and the cycles of life, one season following the next, one birth following one death, proceeding across the generations. Indeed, in his recent CBC Massey Lecture, anthropologist Wade Davis noted that during the Paleolithic period, humans’ criteria of beauty seemed to be stable for 25,000 years.

Most of us are aware of the future in ways and to a degree that might have been unimaginable in earlier times or different places. We now believe that the future will inevitably be different from our own times, and we are aware of its potency and potentiality, and of our influences over it. We all carry, individually and collectively, an image or vision of the future. In stable, healthy and hopeful times, our individual and collective vision of the future can show us a path forward, one we can take with confidence in the correctness of our direction. Such a vision is “the more or less explicit claim or expression of a future that is idealized

in order to mobilize present potential to move into the direction of this future.”<sup>1</sup> (Van der Helm, 2009, p. 100). In contrast, in unstable times of despair and doubt, our vision of the future may be a source of fear.

Perhaps it was Bill McKibben, in his 1989 book *The End of Nature*, who first crystallized an idea surfaced earlier by folks like Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold: that the future in front of us may be of a diminished and damaged web of life. McKibben pointed out that there was no place left that was ‘natural’, and that human influence extended every place as even the atmosphere was now a human artifact, changed beyond ‘natural’ by the impact of human industrial activity. That activity is now also reflected in the scholarly papers written for the scientific journals. Reading those papers can leave one with a sense of loss and diminishment, a sense of increasing risk around climate change, loss of habitat, fisheries disappearing, Antarctic ice sheet disintegration and more. With such disturbing findings, is it any wonder that we – both young and old – might be concerned with the future?

When we as a culture have, by our collective actions, negated the possibility of realizing our individual dreams — and all of us have similar dreams related to the flourishing of our personhoods, families and communities — what do we tell our youth? When our images of the future are increasingly of loss and diminishment, of extinctions, of pollution, of rising sea levels and shrinking glaciers, what and how do we teach our children?

We can imagine a variety of futures. When our desires and expectations for the future are confronted by a present reality that radically differs from that expectation, what can we do? If, in fact, our expectations are nothing more than wishful thinkings which bear little relationship to the future that our present actions seem to be generating, our self-deception can not and will not serve us well. Our vision of the future needs to have the power of hopefulness and not the pathology of deception. There is a power and greatness in a view of the future that is both hopeful and at the same time a vision with motive force.

*The rise and fall of images of the future precedes or accompanies the rise and fall of cultures. As long as a society’s image is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full bloom. Once the image begins to decay and lose its vitality, however, the culture does not long survive. (Polak, 1973, p. 19)*

When we talk about the future with youth, do we offer images of a hopeful future, and by this I mean a future that is both desirable and achievable through collective and individual actions? Or do we present images of despair? Is



our image a dystopian vision of the future as hell, or a utopian one, a vision of heaven? Do we feel that we can influence the future for good or ill, or do we believe we are powerless? Is the future already determined, or can we change the course of history through actions needed to make our vision a reality? Do we have a vision that is optimistic, healthy and hopeful, or pessimistic, sick and hopeless? These are questions that we as educators need to ask ourselves and reflect on the cultural zeitgeist as we talk with our students about the present and future.

“The future may well be decided by the images of the future with the greatest power to capture our imaginations and draw us to them, becoming self-fulfilling prophecies” (Olson, 1995, p. 34). Indeed, Fred Polak, author of *The Image of the Future*, felt that “...the potential strength of a culture could be measured by measuring the intensity and energy of its images of the future. These images were seen to act as a barometer indicating the potential rise or fall of a culture” (1973, p. 300). While the influences of a culture’s positive vision can become self-fulfilling, so too can the influences of pessimism and despair. When a culture’s aspirations die out, as the psalmist tells us, the culture dies: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” (Proverbs 29:18). The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead provided this memorable image of a culture’s movement into the future:

*When man ceases to wander, he will cease to ascend in the scale of being. Physical wandering is still important, but greater still is the power of man’s spiritual adventures — adventures of thought, adventures of passionate feeling, adventures of aesthetic experience.... Modern science has imposed on humanity the necessity for wandering. This progressive thought and its progressive technology make the transition through time, from generation to generation, a true migration into uncharted seas of adventure. The very benefit of wandering is that it is dangerous and needs skills to avert evils. We must expect, therefore, that the future will disclose dangers. It is the business of the future to be dangerous” (1925, p. 208).*

## Danger and Fear

“So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance” (Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s First Inaugural address, 1933)

If it is, as Whitehead puts it, the business of the future to be dangerous, then we have to come to terms with the fear

that danger may elicit. One way to do that is to try to control the external danger that generates the fear; the other is to control our internal fear. The classic responses of virtually all animals to an external danger are the same: to *fight*, take *flight* or *freeze*. The appropriate response depends on the circumstances. If you believe you can better your opponent, you will stay and fight. If you cannot, and you are swift or clever, you will flee by running away. And if all else fails, you may freeze and hope the danger goes away.

It is clear that the changes in our global environments described by modern science pose real dangers both to us as humans and to the natural systems of which we are a part. Which of these three responses would be reasonable given that global situation? Clearly, *freezing* is out of the question, yet many politicians and decision makers within the global community seem to want to do nothing about the various crises facing us, preferring instead the status quo. The status quo is also supported by ‘deniers.’ There are ‘deniers’ for all sorts of issues — climate change, carcinogens, acid rain, clear-cut logging and so on — and all make a pitch for freezing in the status quo. Their modus operandi is, first, to deny that there is a problem at all, then downplay its severity or predict economic ruin if it is addressed, and then propose relying on human ingenuity and technological progress to solve the problem, all the while exploiting scientific uncertainty, using decontextualized scientific reporting and flawed studies by non-scholars or pseudo-scientists, and insulting those scientists and politicians who are pushing for change. (Moser & Dilling, 2004)

Freezing might be a typical societal first response to crisis, but we can freeze individually, too, feeling that the problems we face are too great. When we do look at the large-scale problems in front of us, we can end up feeling helpless, and we can feel hopeless in the face of the situation. Yet the option to freeze, cannot be the message for our youth, nor can we teach a response of hopelessness and helplessness.

*Fleeing* is a second response to danger. In our current state of economic uncertainty, the Canadian government’s response of “economic stimulus packages” seems to be a fleeing from the real issues. Governments are acting as if simply throwing money towards more of the same — continuing to support our outmoded and destructive 19th and 20th-century industries and institutions — will surely make things better. Marshall McLuhan (1967), the great Canadian media theorist, referred to this kind of thinking as moving into the future with our eyes firmly planted on the past:

*When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavors of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.... Spaceship earth is still operated by railway conductors.*



We cannot recommend this kind of response to danger to our youth either. We cannot flee backwards into an unsustainable past and expect that doing more of the same will be an adequate response to the challenges of tomorrow.

The only response that looks straight at the danger and confronts it in an active manner is *fighting*. Fighting takes skill, knowledge, strength and, above all, courage. It can also take collaboration, coordination, conversation and compromise to achieve one’s ends. If we are going to fight, it must be against the greatest opponent that all profound revolutions are fought against: our present-day understandings and actions, our assumptions and presuppositions. The great economist John Maynard Keynes wrote “The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds” (Keynes, 1935).

We have to force our eyes away from the rearview mirror and look clearly out through the front window.

Our form of fighting has to involve consciously planned responses to danger and our resulting fear, based on our best knowledge and understanding. Means do influence ends, and the means of our fight will have impacts on the ends achieved. If we are to be successful, our response to the dangers of the future will have to involve resistance to the pressures and systems that force us to adopt unsustainable means of operating. To tell youth that they should freeze in the status quo is of no use. And in truth, where can we flee to?

## Facing our fear and the future

So how do we talk to youth about the future? If Whitehead is correct and it is the business of the future to be dangerous, and the science of our times tells us that the future is dangerous, we need to talk about that. And the truth is that the recent future has always been dangerous, especially since the rise of modern science. As Whitehead says, each generation faces its own dangers and needs skills both to disclose and to avert evils. Tolkien put into Gandalf’s mouth the words about having to decide what to do with the time given to us; one must work towards the fulfillment of a vision, but realize that its fulfillment may be a long time in coming.

But what are the skills and attitudes we need? From his prison cell, the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, later executed by the Nazis for his role in a plot to murder Hitler, wrote in 1944, “We have spent too much time thinking, supposing that if only we weigh every possibility in advance, everything will somehow happen automatically. We have learnt a bit too late in the day that action springs not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility” (Bonhoeffer & Gruchy, 1991, p. 295). A readiness for responsibility is clearly a key for the skill that we need, youth and elder alike.

We also need the skills of effective action in a variety of

arenas, from individual actions to the expression of collective political will. We will face an uncertain future together. We have to organize, to talk and to push each other, and pushing is an attribute that youth have always done and always done well. Facing the future means that solving the problems that we face collectively is not just my personal problem, and that only by working together as a we can those problems facing us be solved. The problems are large and there are many places where we can put our energies; indeed, the collective we have to put our energies into many places at the same time to see the kinds of results that we need to see. Arne Naess, the co-creator of the Deep Ecology Platform, used to say that “the frontier is long,” and we all have a place where we can work to break through the barrier to the other side.

We have to talk about the fact that our lives need to be purposeful and have meaning (e.g., Frankl, 1984) because it is that sense of purpose and meaning that will attract us, will pull us, towards the future that we want to see. Throughout human history, one clear purpose of human life, as Aristotle noted more than two thousand years ago, was to live well, to flourish and achieve a state of happiness and satisfaction: but our happiness cannot simply reside in material wealth and prosperity that is only available to a relatively few of the global many. As educators, we can engage with our students to consider the nature of happiness and the impact of mass consumerism on both happiness (e.g., Bok, 2010; Lane, 2000) and on the sustainability of the entire human enterprise. A skill for confronting the future might be the ability to develop a range of purposes for our lives, considering what we can and should do with the time that is given to us. Emma Wood Rous, writing in *Green Teacher* #69 (2002) had her high school students read *Walden*, and then write their own version of “What I Live For,” following Thoreau’s “Where I lived and what I lived for” chapter, thus potentially at least, making the natural idealism of youth explicit.

What are the qualities that will allow us to flourish? When we talk to youth about the future, we have to talk about those qualities that our postmodern world sometimes forgets, but that have been the hallmark of the best of our societies for millennia. Regarding these qualities, Aristotle wrote “The things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them ... men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts” (*Nicomachean Ethics*). These qualities are those such as friendship, courage, self-restraint, wisdom, and a love of justice, along with respect, caring, frugality, awe and hope. These are what the ancients called **virtues** – dispositions and habits that lead to right actions – and it has long been known that the only way to learn them is to do them: one can’t learn these through teaching, but only through practice, until they become habit and to not do them becomes nearly unthinkable. We need to identify and then practice, over and over, the virtues that will allow us to move with courage into the future. Likely more than anything that can be measured in standardized exams, these are the tools that we will need to face the future.

As teachers, focusing some of our efforts on the analysis of our cultural understanding of where happiness comes

from may help to enact the needed education which asks us to consider whether human well-being is necessarily derived from material possessions, wealth or fame. Indeed, the research is becoming increasingly clear that economic prosperity, beyond a certain point, does not cause happiness, but the converse may be more correct: happiness may result in economic prosperity. Since our society seemingly fails to teach us what actually brings about happiness, most of us fail to act in ways that are in fact good for us.

All of this – for example confronting the environmental changes that are now going to happen even were we to stop emitting CO<sub>2</sub>, or confronting the lie that we can ‘grow’ our economy forever and purchase happiness through an endless succession of consumer items – will require courage: courage will be of particular value and an important virtue for youth. We will need courage to create alternative images of the future, images that we want to live in and that can be achieved given the changes that are already unfolding in front of us, and then the courage to map our pathway to that future. Rav Nachman, the 18th century Chassidic rabbi and sage, spoke about courage: “The whole world, and everything in it, is a very narrow bridge. And the important thing is to not be afraid at all.” This is a truth for our time. We all have to begin walking on that narrow bridge. Our job as teachers is to learn, together with the youth, the knowledge, skills and beliefs necessary to make the crossing. And to not be afraid.

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