

# Where love and need are one and work is play for mortal stakes: My journey as a futurist

## A Personal Essay

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From September 20-22, 2006, the School of Global Leadership and Entrepreneurship hosted Dr. Clem Bezold on campus at Regent University, for the fourth annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay by Bezold was circulated to participants beforehand. We encourage you to join us for our annual Foresight conferences, as we hear from top futurists from the both the U.S. and around the world.



Part of the reason that I'm a futurist was the pull of a fragment of a poem I read in high school and brought with me to college by Robert Frost. The operative part goes:

*But yield who will to their separation,  
My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation  
As my two eyes make one in sight.  
Only where love and need are one,  
And the work is play for mortal stakes,  
Is the deed ever really done,  
For Heaven and the future's sakes.*

### **Origins**

My journey to become a futurist was not planned but was aided by several things. I am a native of and grew up in Miami in the 1950s and 60s, a great place that had lots of outdoors – from the Everglades to the beach – where we had lots of freedom to roam and explore (it was much easier to grow up in that time and place than in most places in the US now). A sense of work and service came naturally from family and Catholic schooling. I had a great high school experience that included dynamic and committed teachers at a new boys high school that was joined to an existing girls school on a beautiful spot on Biscayne Bay (I was a minority in a school that was between 70 and 90% new immigrants from Cuba). That sense of service and an interest in broader view took me to the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University for college.

In college, during the Viet Nam War, I went from being an active ROTC cadet to being a conscientious objector. However, when I took a theology reading course with a leading Jesuit peace activist during my junior year, I

realized that if I could justify a police force carrying and using weapons, and I can, then I was only a selective conscientious objector. Instead of focusing on US foreign policy I developed an interest third world development. I spent the summer of 1969 in Medellin, Colombia, observing and assisting on local development projects. I graduated in the spring of 1970 at the height of demonstrations against the Viet Nam War and the Kent State killings and spent the summer and fall working on the campaign of a peace candidate running for Congress in Cincinnati. (That congressional campaign work was a lesson in unanticipated consequences and sub-optimal investments of energy. The candidate was a young lawyer. It was his first run for office. He lost, but then ran for city council. In later city council elections, he was the highest vote getter and therefore became Mayor of Cincinnati. He left to become a television newscaster, developed his own show and went national – his name is Jerry Springer.)

As a graduate student in political science at the University of Florida, I focused on American government and got a job at the Center for Governmental Responsibility at the UF Law School. In picking my dissertation topic during the 1973 energy crisis, I decided that anticipating crises was an important part of responsible government, particularly for legislatures. The role of Congressional Committees in Foresight in Congress became the focus of my dissertation. I was also a visiting scholar at the Brookings Institution, which helped in getting access to people on Capitol Hill for my research. In the process of researching the foresight provision developed by then-Representative (later Senator) John Culver, I learned that Alvin Toffler had worked with Culver on that. The foresight provision of the House Rules calls for forecasting and futures research in the areas of the Committee's jurisdiction. I met Toffler and he asked me to join him in working on a Committee for Anticipatory Democracy (Anticipatory Democracy had been Toffler's prescription in his 1970 best seller *Future Shock*). In 1973, in response to Culver's request, we organized the first legislative seminar on futurism for Congress. That in turn helped stimulate the creation of the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future (CGR). Both Al Gore and Newt Gingrich would subsequently chair the Clearinghouse.

In the mid-1970s, I was working for CGR, living in Florida, but spending much time in Washington promoting foresight and anticipatory democracy. Toffler had asked me to edit a book on anticipatory democracy, which was a significant formative experience for me. Toffler and Jim Dator (a political scientist, activist, and leading thinker on the future) thought it would be important to have a DC- based foresight arm. Toffler convinced the President of Antioch University William Birenbaum to fund the creation of a small Institute. We named it the Institute for Alternative Futures, and I became its Director (and initially the only staff member) in January 1977. IAF was housed at the Antioch School of Law in Washington, a school focused on training lawyers to work for the poor. Unfortunately, the Antioch School of Law did not survive. IAF became an independent non-profit organization shortly thereafter. In 1982, we created IAF's for-profit subsidiary, Alternative Futures Associates (AFA).

As we were starting the Institute in Washington, Jim Dator was establishing a graduate futures program at the University of Hawaii. In addition to serving as my coach in becoming a futurist, Dator provided us with a stream of interns from his futures program. The most successful has been Jonathan Peck, who after 22 years at IAF succeeded me as President.

### ***Types of Futures Work***

Over the last three decades, I've been able to do futures work in and for communities, cities, state legislatures, federal agencies, international organizations, and corporations. I have worked with executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. We have worked in all corners of the country and the globe, on six continents, and from cities and communities such as Peoria Illinois and Disney's new town of Celebration, to parts of the UN – particularly the World Health Organization. Some observations from that range of experiences:

- The cycles in legislatures, executive branch agencies, and the courts are different, but futures is strange work in each of those settings.
- Internal leaders or champions are critical. No one has made futures a truly permanent operation, but almost nothing is permanent in government processes, so that is not unique to futures or foresight activities.

- Clear objectives are important – particularly developed with a sense of what futures work can accomplish.
- Most government folks are relatively conservative in considering change – futures work should err on assuming or exploring more change rather than less.

In some agency futures work, the formal objectives may or may not be met, or the report and recommendations might not be acted on (especially if the effort is successful in being visionary). Yet the most important outcome of some efforts is the “mind change” among those involved in terms of how they perceive the future and the opportunity to create preferred futures.

### ***Futures in Corporations***

IAF has worked with a wide range of large companies. In most cases, companies have come to us for futures work. In some cases we bid for scenarios or other futures work. In those settings we win about half the time, including against McKinsey, Booz Allen, and other large consulting firms. I’ve had the opportunity to do futures work on six continents – mostly focused on developing national level scenarios. Large companies tend to have more money to pay for scenarios and can more easily be bold – though they often fall prey to getting stuck in their paradigm.

Futures, as we do it, is about understanding and creating. As it turns out scenarios and vision work, in the hands of leaders, are very effective change management tools. While neither IAF nor AFA market our services as “change management,” our clients often use them for that purpose. I was pleased and proud to learn that the Gartner Group had done a global survey on consulting firms that do effective change management for multinational companies. They said the big three consulting firms can generally deliver, but that there were a dozen small firms globally that consistently were effective for large companies. We were on the list. Again, scenarios and vision work, are powerful tools for transforming an organization. We’ve seen this in the public and the private sector.

### ***Health Futures***

I’ve been able to work in and on the future of a range of topics. Health is the one where I’ve done the most topic-focused work. This was ironic, and a lesson for futurists. I think that futurists can provide insight and coaching to any organization or topic – the deeper the knowledge by the futurist, generally the better they can play their role. You need to know enough about the topic and the systems in which the topic sits to understand key forces, expectable trends, and to judge what might be relevant surprises. You also need to know when, as futures consultant, your opinion and position does not matter, and when it does not. We help organizations and communities better understand and create their preferred futures, not ours.

For public programs of the type that IAF runs there are some ground rules where we need to take positions on what should be considered.

One example was one of IAF’s first programs. In 1978 I started a series of Foresight Seminars for Congressional Staff on pharmaceutical innovation. Coming from an activist background, I made sure that IAF had full editorial control over our programs and that we would have a range of opinions at each seminar, including positions unpopular with our funding sources. We briefly halted the program when a sponsor did not want to go along with that. The first 20 years of foresight seminars are available on IAF’s website at <http://www.altfutures.com/foresightchronicle/chronicleintro.htm>.

I have been privileged to work with the World Health Organization on a variety of projects, including integrating foresight into their various units; scenarios for their current 11<sup>th</sup> General Program of Work; creating a tool for forecasting supply and demand for long-term care workers; and assisting in the process of revising the global “Health for All” vision. WHO remains one of the most visionary of my clients and one of the most bureaucratic. The Health for All (HFA) vision – agreed to by all nations, including the US,

*Recognizes the oneness of humanity and therefore the need to promote health and to alleviate ill-health and suffering universally and in a spirit of solidarity.*

*The realization of the goals of HFA depends on upholding commitment to its key values: human rights, equity, ethics and gender sensitivity. These values are strongly interlinked, each serving to underpin the execution of policy and strategies.*

I had the good fortune to consult with the US Surgeon General, David Satcher, as the US was preparing its *Healthy People 2010 Objectives* for the nation – which served as US input and support for WHO’s Health for All vision and as the major US goals each decade in health. The *Healthy People 2010 Report* includes 437 objectives and 2 overarching goals – one is longer years of healthy life. The second is the elimination of health disparities. I was facilitating the meeting of the Secretary’s Council (Secretary of DHHS) that reviewed the language of the second goal. None thought the goal could be achieved in the decade. I asked if it was more important to have the right goal or to have a goal that could be achieved in the decade – they chose the former and kept the stronger language. In our work on preferable futures it is clear that commitment – particularly to difficult, important outcomes – often must be done years in advance. Both the WHO and the US healthy people goals include a strong commitment to equity. Equity is not sameness. Equity is fairness. In health, for example, disparities create a condition of the lack of equity if the differences at hand are avoidable and unfair or unjust. Our sense of what is unfair or unjust is a moving target. Society has changed its mind about slavery, women’s rights, and some aspects of the environment. I think equity is on that path. I’m fortunate to have been present at important moments and spend major parts of my effort on accelerating this trend of equity as fairness.

### **Aspirational Futures**

Futures work, as we do it at IAF, is about understanding the future, and about better creating your preferred future. At IAF we have evolved what we call “aspirational futures” as our approach.

Aspirational futures has evolved from a scenario style that always dealt with a set of archetypes. Originally, with coaching from Jim Dator, these included an extrapolative optimistic scenario typical of Herman Kahn; a challenge/negative scenario; and two transformational scenarios, one more technological, typically from Alvin Toffler, and the other more focused on human growth and transformation from Willis Harman or social transformation from Hazel Henderson. Our approach and logic has evolved. A good example of scenarios using our updated aspirational approach to aid the UK government is targeting genomic research is available at <http://les.man.ac.uk/cric//genomics/default.htm>. In these scenarios and three subsequent projects, we worked with Ian Miles and his colleagues at the University of Manchester. Miles and Luke Georgiou had independently evolved an approach to developing “success scenarios” that parallels our aspirational approach.

Part of the evolution of our approach was shaped by Roger Fritz. He was an amazing facilitator and process designer who trained us in his “aspirations model.” Your aspirations should drive your behavior which in turn shapes your environment – also called the A-B-C (aspirations – behavior – change) model. Many organizations and individuals experience challenges in their environment and spend most of their time reacting to it, forgetting their aspirations. Roger noted that Sigmund Freud said that it was man’s lot to be shaped by and react to his environment. Freud’s student Carl Jung argued against this view, saying that in fact it is man’s task to create his future. The lesson I take from this is that acting in aspirational, visionary ways is a choice. And that it takes great effort to maintain that choice.

Part of what we do in our aspirational futures is to get organizations to “aspiring space” – to have them consider their vision, enhance it if necessary, and use their vision to more effectively guide them. Noble aspirations are part of pursuing an effective vision. Roger Fritz died of cancer in July of 2006. In eulogizing him, IAF President Jonathan Peck effectively stated that

*Roger was a gift to the world. He helped so many people and organizations... he understood that service is a noble form of leadership, and leadership is a noble form of service. Through this simple wisdom, he helped leaders from the largest corporations to the some of the poorest communities in America connect with their aspirations and lead others through them. We brought Roger and Roger brought us on many of those journeys.*

While Roger did that for us, I'd argue that, at its best, futures work does that in all who are touched by it. ....

*Where love and need are one and work is play for mortal stakes.*