

Schacht, Steven. "Teaching about Being an Oppressor," 2002; <http://www.nostatusquo.com/Schacht/teaching.html>.

Reference

Ellis, C., and A. Bochner, eds. *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*. London: AltaMira, 1996.

Finding our way, an extraordinary lifelong challenge, has a special component in the choosing (and re-choosing) of a job and a career . . . perhaps a dozen job changes and half as many career changes over the course of a work life. Help with this sort of decision-making is available from a conceptual tool popular with serious futurists. It identifies three major types of future, and thereby facilitates better-than-ever thinking (and feeling) about vocational options. As gracefully explained below, the tool makes more likely securing relevant utopian notions-and thereby contributing "to the good things of life."

30. Choosing Your Future

Wendell Bell

During more than four decades of teaching, I have often served as a sounding board for students who were deciding what to do with their lives. I learned that I could be helpful by listening carefully to them and asking questions to find out what they really wanted to do. Usually that did not take long. Then, I urged them to state their goals clearly and to examine them both in the light of alternatives and their own values. I asked them to imagine, if they pursued these goals, how their future lives would be ten, twenty, and more years ahead. After that, if they still thought that was what they wanted to do, I advised them to go for it.

Not all cases, though, were as simple as that. I remember one young man, let's call him Bill, whose dilemma was that his father was pressuring him to become a lawyer, while his grandfather was urging him to become a doctor. Whichever he decided to do would please one but displease the other, a double bind. After an hour or more of conversation, during which, among other things, he rejected the possibility of becoming both a doctor *and* a lawyer and focusing on legal cases dealing with medicine, I was still puzzled about what he himself wanted. Finally, exasperated, he said, "Okay, what I really want to be is a stand-up comedian."

I was surprised, but not totally thrown. (After all, Yale graduate Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* comic strip appears in newspapers daily. Careers such

FROM ARTHUR B. SHOSTAK (ED.), 2003. VIABLE
UTOPIAN IDEAS: SHAPING A BETTER WORLD.
ARMONK, NY: M. E. SHARPE, INC., PP. 151-59.

Choices: Very Personal • 152

as that are not inconceivable.) I asked him to tell me more. As he talked, it became clear that he was serious and had done a lot of thinking about it. We explored his image of his future self as a comedian.

We looked at the uncertainties and obstacles, the chanciness of it, the potential lack of stability and security, what it might mean to his future wife and children, and how he knew that he had enough talent to succeed. We also talked about the creative challenge, fun, satisfaction, and, possibly, even the financial success that he thought it would give him. Clearly, in Bill's mind, being a stand-up comedian was a viable utopian idea.

In the end, he was determined, so I suggested that he talk to his father and grandfather, explaining his hopes to them and saying that he wanted to try being a comedian for a year or so. If it did not work out, he would go either to law or medical school, satisfied that he had given his dream a chance.

Some weeks later I received a call from Bill's father who wanted to know what kind of an idiot I was to advise his son to do a dumb thing like becoming a stand-up comedian. Given his father's anger, I could understand why Bill shifted the "blame" onto me.

My talk with Bill was years ago. Since then, I've learned more about how people can make good choices and take the right actions to create desirable futures, not only for themselves, but also for the people around them and even, sometimes, for the communities and societies in which they live. In a nutshell, my advice is simple: Consider what is possible, what is probable, and what is preferable. When you have done that and have made a decision, pursue your goal with tenacity.

The Possible

First of all, one must consider what is possible. Most people most of the time fail to do this adequately. They do not take into account anything close to the full range of alternatives for their future. Rather, they usually consider only a few of the real possibilities. As a result, many people trudge through life ignorant of most of the things that they could have been, some of which they might have liked better than what they become.

To explore all the possibilities, look at the present situation and the opportunities in the world around you, your own talents and values, and the resources available to you. Also, break out of the straitjacket of conventional thinking. Include, but go beyond, the expectations of your family, friends, and socio-cultural setting. Stretch your imagination, asking not only what is, but also what could be.

Remember that present possibilities for the future are real. They exist, even if they are only potential. Some things, for example, are breakable, but may never be broken; achievable, but may never be achieved; or buildable, but may never be built. Just as some people are teachable, but will never be taught;

Choosing Your Future • 153

curable, but will never be cured; and funny, but will never be stand-up comedians. Thus, we ought to search the present for clues as to what is possible.

Moreover, all decision making is future oriented. We all live within a constantly moving stream of time. Although we make decisions to act in particular ways now in the present, the consequences of our acts always occur in the future. Thus, we ought to scan the emerging future. To make informed and intelligent decisions we must think ahead, charting the trends of social change as well as forecasting the consequences of our own actions.

Although Bill did somewhat better than some people, because at least he looked beyond the conventional careers urged on him by his family, he did not do a satisfactory job of searching the horizon for a variety of other possibilities.

For example, ask yourself how the world is changing. How will technological revolutions in energy, information, materials, and genetics affect your future? What new occupations are coming in renewable energy resources, in the Internet and other high-tech means of communication, in the development of new building materials, and in a coming age where everything from food to human beings can be genetically altered?

Ask yourself, too, what new expertise will be needed as globalization continues and peoples of different countries increasingly interact and come to depend more and more on each other. If Asian countries become the driving economic forces of the future, what opportunities will they offer for new careers?

What new possibilities will occur if nanotechnology becomes widespread, for example in medical therapies? Should you become a specialist in the design of personal robots because such robots are one of the waves of the future? What new services will be needed for an increasingly aged population? What new job opportunities will come with the exploration and colonization of space? Will housing and transportation be different in the future than now? If so, what new occupations will they require? What about education? Will it be increasingly carried on at all ages? Will there be new Internet universities? How will new information and communication technologies alter conventional colleges and universities? In these developments, what are the possibilities for new professions?

Of course, not everything and anything you might imagine is possible, but there are two kinds of errors that we can make when thinking about what is possible. We can err by believing things to be impossible when, in fact, they are possible, or we can err by believing things to be possible when they are not. Although both types of errors can lead to bad decisions, try not to dismiss what seems impossible too quickly, if it is something that you want. The reason is that when you try the impossible and fail, the world as it really is impinges on your consciousness and invites you to change your beliefs. You learn. (And if you have taken a course in which the professor has told you that "the world

Choices: Very Personal • 154

as it really is" does not exist, then politely ask that professor if he or she would like to jump in front of a speeding truck. Splat! End of argument.)

To the contrary, when you do not even try to do something because you falsely believe it is impossible, you do not learn. Such untested false beliefs become the walls of a prison you construct for yourself, walls that confine you as much as if they were made of some of those plastic wrappings around packages that no normal human can open without a crowbar. Thus, when you are making decisions about your future, consider all the alternative possibilities relevant to your hopes and desires that really exist in the present. Free your powers of observation, imagination, and creativity.

The Probable

Second, ask yourself, what is probable? There are a lot of things that may be possible, but they are not equally likely. For example, under certain conditions, nearly all the people on the earth might learn to speak Chinese in the next twenty years, but it does not seem very likely given present trends. Once you have surveyed the alternative possibilities relevant to your interests and hopes, consider how likely they are. Do not base important life decisions on forecasts that have low probabilities of actually occurring, unless you want something enough to take a large risk of failure.

Here the methods of futures studies can be of help. Futurists do not look into crystal balls or watch their navels and meditate in order to discern the future. Rather, they deduce probabilities for alternative futures from a variety of data. They use existing knowledge about causes and effects; they chart long-term trends and project them into the future.

Futurists use the results of survey research into how people intend to behave in the future—for example, when and what they plan to buy or for whom they intend to vote. They study the opinions of experts in particular fields about future advances in their fields. They do computer simulation and modeling based on a variety of assumptions as, for example, in studying the future of the life-sustaining capacities of the earth and population growth. They engage in gaming, looking at the interaction of players in the game for clues to the outcome of real-life situations as they do at the War Gaming Department of the Naval War College. They scan and monitor activities and social indicators, including the world's newspapers, in order to detect changes. They use other methods, too.

With knowledge of your present social setting and accurate forecasts of the future, you can increase the wisdom of your decisions and the effectiveness of your actions. If you had been around in the early part of the twentieth century, for example, you would not have wanted to go into any business dependent on the horse and buggy unless you were collecting relics for a museum, since the automobile was then beginning to replace them.

Choosing Your Future • 155

In addition to social trends, you ought to consider your choices and the consequences of your own actions in any given situation. Ask yourself, for example, what is my most probable future if I keep doing what I have been doing? (Perhaps that has been serving burgers at McDonald's, which, of course, is a lot more respectable than loafing at home freeloading off your parents.)

Ask yourself, to take the choices that Bill faced, what is my most probable future if I go to law school, or medical school, or become a stand-up comedian? These are alternative and contingent scenarios for the future. What different scenarios can you think of for your own future? What probabilities can you assign to them, if you did choose this one or that one and worked to achieve it?

In sum, you should consider social trends and their probable future trajectories as they may affect your future life. In addition, you ought to assess your own possible actions, and those of other people who may influence events of concern to you, for their probable consequences for your future.

The Preferable

Third, ask yourself, what is preferable? What kind of a future do you really want for yourself? Even though you have discovered what is possible and what is probable, you cannot intelligently choose what to do until you also know which of your alternative possible futures are the most desirable to you.

Some of the goals that people use to make such personal judgments include having good health, a happy marriage and family life with children, and having close friends. Also, they usually take into account doing something that will give them a sufficient income to have a comfortable life, although many people are not interested simply in making enormous amounts of money and becoming extremely wealthy. In making their life's decisions, people often give considerable weight to being good at what they do, having a sense of teamwork in their work or community activities, and being appreciated and respected by others.

At a more profound level, people hope to lead meaningful lives and to feel at peace and harmony with themselves about their relations with others. Moreover, they wish to have some control over their lives, some sense of freedom. In addition, most people strive to find some moral purpose to their lives.

Put another way, most of the world's people want a certain amount of freedom and personal well-being. They want good health, a job, a decent level of living, decent housing, a happy home life, education, and opportunities for their children. They also want to fulfill their obligations to other people, and they balance their desires for freedom with being responsible and loving members of families, communities, and societies.

For most people, these things taken together are not always easily achieved.

Choices: Very Personal • 156

They take hard work, effective decision making, and, perhaps most of all, tenacity. No doubt you will face disappointments, obstacles, and setbacks. When you do, reassess your methods and even your goals as necessary because things seldom work out exactly as planned and because we constantly get new information and feedback. But do not give up easily. Although you may have to change your strategies, be persistent. Paying proper attention to the preferable, to your basic values, and to a balance among them can keep you from becoming one of those people who hate their jobs but have twenty-five more years until retirement.

Once you know what is possible, probable, and preferable for you, stop and consider one more thing: How can the life that you choose help to create the kind of world in which you—and your children and grandchildren—would like to live?

Creating a World in Which You Want to Live

The values that you use to judge your preferable future, of course, are not yours alone. Many of them are widely shared by other people as well, not only by others in your own country but by people nearly everywhere on earth. Such values often express the wisdom of millennia of human development. They are not arbitrary; rather, they are part of an evolving system of human morality which gives meaning to our lives and more or less guides us in our actions.

Such values derive in part from the type of bio-psychological being we are. For example, we cannot survive without air, water, food, sleep, and personal security. As human beings, we have other needs for comfort and flourishing, such as needs for clothing, shelter, companionship, affection, and sex. Thus, the human community has learned to value such things.

Still other human values derive from the nature of group living. In addition to our bio-psychological needs, we have social needs. For example, our needs for love, approval, emotional support, and communication can be satisfied adequately only by interaction with other humans. Moreover, social life itself has shaped human values. Morality importantly functions to make social life possible. It encourages people to live and work together and to learn from one another. Through the trust, cooperation, honesty, and mutual regulation that it provides, morality promotes the multiple payoffs of organized human effort that allow individuals and societies to thrive far beyond what would be possible if each individual tried to work alone, in isolation from or in conflict with others.

Today, there is an emerging global ethic. It is partially described in many documents, including the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Parliament of World's Religions' *Towards a Global Ethic*. All persons, both religious and secular, can affirm the ethical convictions contained in these documents.

Choosing Your Future • 157

Values in the global ethic include individual responsibility; treating others as we wish them to treat us; respect for life; treating all other people with dignity, patience, understanding and acceptance of one another; forgiveness; solidarity and relatedness with other peoples of the world; kindness and generosity; caring for others; compassion; love for one another; equality between men and women; nonviolence; economic and social justice; peace and global order; nature-friendly ways of life; respect for human rights; constancy and trustworthiness, truthfulness and honesty; moderation and modesty; loyalty; safety and security; freedom as long as no harm is done to others; tolerance; and sexuality that expresses and reinforces a loving relationship lived by equal partners.

Do we now live in such a world? Well, yes and no. Although there are many violations of such moral rules, many people, perhaps most of the time, live up to them within their families and neighborhoods, even in their casual social contacts. Some people certainly do not—those, for example, who are locked in deadly conflict with others, who are living in poverty without jobs or hope, or who are dominated by greed and narrow conceptions of self-interest. The question is—Would you like to live in such a moral world?

Or would you rather live in a world whose life-sustaining capacities were constantly under threat by air, water, and land pollution, in a world dominated by prejudice, hatred, theft, greed, arrogance, mistrust, hostility, violence, envy, jealousy, resentment, terror, oppression, torture, mutilation, killing, ruthlessness and brutality, lies and deceit, swindling and hypocrisy, demagoguery, fanaticism and intolerance, opportunism, domination, and the degradation of people?

Most of us, obviously, would prefer to live in a good society, characterized by peace and human decency, dignity, well-being, and freedom. Wouldn't you? If so, then, when you are choosing what you want to do with your life, think about how your life might contribute to creating a good society.

Does this mean that you have to give up caring for your own needs and hopes? Definitely not. Your first moral obligation is to yourself, to take care of yourself and not to be an unnecessary burden on others. You are being morally responsible when you seek your own survival, comfort, and self-fulfillment. Beyond that, it is also your moral obligation to do no harm to others and to help others when you are able, without impoverishing yourself.

Remember that you are choosing not only a career, but also a life and the kind of person that you will become. No matter what career path you choose, think of yourself as the world—even if only some small part of it—for those people with whom you share your life. Like most of us, you may not be able to control the actions of nations and multinational corporations, or the momentous events of history, but you can learn to control yourself in the way that you treat other people.

Thus, it is within your power to create a world of self-restraint, empathy,

understanding, and generosity for each person with whom you interact. Within that part of the lives of others that you constitute, you can—as each of us can—create the good society that you hope will become the future. Such behavior on your part is not mere selfless altruism, because what goes around comes around. As you act, you create the world, not only for others but also for yourself.

Conclusion

Looking back, I wonder if Bill ever tried to be a stand-up comedian or if he became a lawyer or a doctor. I wonder, too, if he even remembers his college dream. Whatever he is doing, I hope, of course, that he is happy and leading a useful and self-fulfilling life. Knowing what I now know, though, I wish that I had had a chance to tell him the following:

“When all is said and done, Bill, it is your life. Thus, after you have examined what is possible, what is probable, and what is preferable for your own future, and after you have listened to what your family members (including your irate Dad) have to say, and you have respectfully explained your views to them, if—all things considered—you still want to be a comedian, then do it.

“You may face some pain. But be what you want to be. For nearly everyone, it takes some pain—hard work, self-discipline, sacrifice, and risk—to lead a satisfying life. The only right answers are perspicacity, patience, perspiration, and persistence.”

Then, I would add, “But Bill, think not only of your career. Think also of the mark that you are leaving on the world and the kind of person that you want to be. Yes, of course, try to be successful at whatever you do, but also remember that you are more than your job, your wealth, your fame, or your power.

“Try to be a decent, understanding, generous, and caring person. As you live your life, be concerned not only about yourself, but also about the freedom and well-being of the other people who share this planet with you. Show concern, too, for the as yet nonexistent future generations who will follow you, so that their future will be better than the past and present. Do so because it is the right thing to do. Do so, too, for your own self-respect.

“Finally, Bill, remember that there are many ways to contribute to the good things of life. Lawyers can do so by bringing order and justice. Doctors can do so by bringing good health and longer life. Comedians, too, can do so by bringing a genuine smile to a face and laughter to the world.”

References

- Barbieri, Eleonora Masini. *Why Futures Studies?* London: Grey Seal, 1993.
- Bell, Wendell. “A Community of Futurists and the State of the Futures Field.” *Futures* 34, nos. 3–4 (April/May 2002): 235–47.

Choosing Your Future • 159

- . *Foundations of Futures Studies*. 2 vols. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1997.
- . "Making People Responsible: The Possible, the Probable, and the Preferable." *American Behavioral Scientist* 42, no. 3 (November/December 1998): 323–39.
- . "New Futures and the Eternal Struggle between Good and Evil." *Journal of Futures Studies* 5, no. 2 (November 2000): 1–20.
- Coates, Joseph F., John B. Mahaffie, and Andy Hines. *2025: Scenarios of US and Global Society Reshaped by Science and Technology*. Akron, OH: Oakhill, 1996.
- Dator, James A., ed. *Advancing Futures: Futures Studies in Higher Education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- The Futurist* 35, no. 6 (November-December 2001).
- Hicks, David. *Lessons for the Future: The Missing Dimension in Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002.
- Küng, Hans. *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*. New York: Crossroad, 1991.
- Parliament of the World's Religions. "Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration." Chicago, IL (August 28-September 5), 1993.
- Shostak, Arthur B., ed. *Utopian Thinking in Sociology: Creating the Good Society*. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association, 2001.
- Slaughter, Richard A., ed. *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*. 3 vols. Hawthorn, Victoria, Australia: DDM Media Group, 1996.

160-Blank

VIABLE UTOPIAN IDEAS

shaping a better world

edited by ARTHUR B. SHOSTAK

M.E. Sharpe

Armonk, New York

London, England

2003