

Developing Constructive and Creative Attitudes and Behaviors about the Future:
Part One – Deep Learning, Emotion, and Motivation

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Future consciousness is the total integrative set of psychological abilities, processes, and experiences humans use in understanding and dealing with the future. Future consciousness is part of our general awareness of time, our temporal consciousness of past, present, and future. It includes the normal human capacities to anticipate, predict, and imagine the future, to have hopes and dreams about the future, and to set goals and plans for the future. Future consciousness involves thinking about the future, evaluating different possibilities and choices, and having feelings, motives, and attitudes about the future. It also includes the total set of ideas, visions, theories, and beliefs humans have about the future – the cognitive content of future consciousness.

Future consciousness is absolutely necessary for normal human life, for without the mental abilities of anticipation, hope, goal setting, and planning we would be aimless, lost, mentally deficient, passive, and reactive. But to what degree and in what ways can this capacity be improved? Beginning with this paper and continuing in a series of subsequent articles, I will address these questions. The ideas I will present reflect sections of my recently published book *The Evolution of Future Consciousness* (especially Chapter One), as well as a set of workshops I am providing at Rio Salado College that offer advice and guidelines for the enhancement of future consciousness.

The place I begin in the workshops is by introducing the idea of deep transformational learning. To fundamentally impact the way people think and behave, learning must be deep, penetrating to core beliefs, values, and feelings about who they are and the world around them. Learning can not simply be at the surface of the mind, as when facts or ideas are just memorized. Deep transformational learning does not merely add new data on top of old, but rearranges the inner layout of the mind, extinguishing and adding elements, and generating a “Gestalt switch.” Further, both thinking and emotion are affected. If the learning is deep and pervasive enough, the sense of self is recreated or redefined. In order to realize deep learning, humility and real openness to change are required. Being locked in the present and the past interferes with transformational learning and movement toward the future.

Next, I explain the idea of future consciousness and state that my goal as a teacher is to stimulate deep learning regarding how people think about and approach the future. I provide an ideal to work toward – a definition of heightened future consciousness. I identify the following psychological characteristics: Realistic optimism, an expanded sense of past and future, an expanded and

highly informed sense of possibilities for the future, courage and commitment, continual growth and self-actualization, self-efficacy and proactive, goal-directed thinking and behavior, creativity and flexibility, and enhanced self-awareness and personal honesty.

I also propose that another way to look at heightened future consciousness is to identify it with the virtue of wisdom. Wisdom can be seen as the highest expression of future consciousness and the overriding goal through the workshops is to enhance wisdom. A definition of wisdom I provide is: Wisdom is connected with an expansiveness of consciousness, into the past and the future, and can be described as the ongoing, evolving capacity to grasp the big picture of life, of what is important and meaningful, and guided by ethics and virtue, the ability to apply this understanding to enhance the well being of life, both for oneself and others. Wisdom is a journey – a sense of future consciousness that necessarily involves a feeling of incompleteness and a desire for continued growth.

The enhancement of future consciousness is not just improvement in knowledge or cognitive capacities, but a pervasive transformation in the human psyche, entailing emotional growth and, as I introduce through the concept of wisdom, a significant development in character virtues. Aside from the overarching ideal of wisdom, I include at the onset the virtues of honesty, courage, and self-responsibility as critical to the growth of future consciousness. For example, the future opens up with an increase in courage to face risks, and one's sense of power over the future comes about by growth in self-responsibility and self-determination. Future consciousness remains atrophied if one feels and behaves like a victim and trapped by external factors. I believe my emphasis on virtues is a unique dimension to my educational approach to enhancing future consciousness.

The central assignment or activity for workshop participants is the development of a preferable future life narrative. Inspired by Antonio Damasio's theory that individuals conceptualize their self-identity in terms of a life story – a dynamic and growing self-created autobiography – I present the idea to the participants that to transform their anticipated future in a new and more constructive direction they need to develop a different story about themselves in the future. Further, I suggest that the future life narrative should be structured around the development of key virtues, e.g., describe a courageous life in the future, or a life dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom. Virtues provide positive values to move toward in the future and put the responsibility and focus for one's future on the individual; the individual sees his or her future in terms of self-development, rather than changes in external conditions or circumstances. After each workshop, participants are asked to apply the ideas of the workshop to further developing their preferred future life narrative.

After laying this groundwork, I dive into human emotion. Emotion is at the core of human consciousness, and all the plans, strategies, principles, and visioning techniques used to expand future consciousness won't have a true and lasting effect if our basic feelings about the future are left unexamined and unaddressed. The two key human emotions pertaining to the future are hope and

fear. Hope generates happiness and enthusiasm about the future; fear and the related emotion of anxiety generate despair, depression, nihilism, and fatalism. Fear and anxiety interfere with the growth of hope. Individuals can have a sense of hopelessness and helplessness toward the future and when this occurs a person feels depression (or despair). Depression, in fact, can be seen as a disorder of future consciousness. Helplessness, as the psychologist Martin Seligman has demonstrated, can be learned, becoming a habitual pattern of thinking and behavior. Feelings of helplessness also negatively impact the development of hope. Building on the famous theory that the three common reactions to stress and fear are fight, freeze, or flight, I suggest that there is a fourth option – to face – and that fears about reality, one’s own abilities, and the future need to be consciously faced, examined, and dealt with. The virtue of courage is critical to this process. Additionally, the virtue of self-honesty is important – becoming aware of one’s emotions, positive or negative, provides a realistic foundation to build upon. Finally, various ways are presented for how to cultivate and enhance hope, e.g., by repeatedly envisioning positive dreams about the future, realistically thinking about how to achieve these dreams, and living this positive, hopeful future to whatever degree is possible today.

Although emotion is a core process, it is not totally independent of thinking and imagination. I review three different perspectives on the connection of emotion and thinking and explain some practical implications for each view. The highly popular cognitive theory of emotions states that thought determines emotion. Hence, using hope and fear as examples, if a person imagines or thinks about positive futures, that person begins to emotionally feel good; in converse, if a person thinks negatively about the future, the person will feel down, sad, afraid, anxious, or depressed. One can change one’s feelings through thinking differently; it is of course important to understand what one presently thinks and feels – that is, to be honest with oneself as a starting point. The second theory is the emotional theory of cognition. People think more constructively, more creatively, even more intelligently, when they are in positive emotional states. Fearful or depressed emotional states produce relative intellectual paralysis. A depressed person can see no way out of an aversive situation – a fearful person is often frozen in thought. The third view, based on my own thinking, is the reciprocal theory of thinking and emotion. These two basic psychological processes are interdependent; hence, one can come at personal transformation from either or preferably both ends. One can use one’s thinking to change one’s emotions; one can use emotions to change thinking.

After discussing emotion, I turn to the topics of motivation and goal-directed behavior. People can have shorter or longer term goals regarding the future and it is an important exercise in the expansion of future consciousness to begin to envision longer time perspectives for one’s goals. Everyone thinks about the future and sets goals, but often people think primarily in terms of the very immediate future and with disconnected short term goals; consequently they fail to provide their lives with any overall direction. Just as importantly, although people will usually say that they hope for success, happiness, and self-fulfillment, I have found as a psychologist that people often fear success (and not just

failure) and actually harbor many negative thoughts and anticipations about how their future will go. Fear of success is based upon habitual thoughts of being undeserving or incapable, and hence images of success conflict with a person's negative self-image and negative thoughts about his or her future.

Critical to the realization of long-term goals are the character traits of faith, commitment, and tenacity. In pursuing any long term goal, there is a tendency to waiver and vacillate, and what seems to separate success from failure in reaching goals is having some kind of personal anchor or principle to hold a person on course through tough or turbulent times. Once a goal has been set, it is important to continually nourish the future reality being sought after. What can a person do today that contributes to the actual living of the positive future? Because people waiver and/or fall back into old habits, it is important to keep pushing forward. Live the future one envisions – enrich its reality everyday. The evolution of the future is a result of a dialectic between the stability of the past and what is new. In creating something new, the past will naturally reassert itself (through old thoughts and patterns of behavior). When the past reasserts itself, it is important to work against this and focus one's attention back on the creation of something novel and different.

I mentioned in the last paragraph the importance of faith. In our rational and secular world, faith is often viewed as something negative. But the future is fundamentally an adventure with risk and uncertainty, and no one can know exactly how life will unfold. Faith in realizing one's goals or dreams is absolutely necessary, since there is no way to know for sure what is going to happen tomorrow. (I do not define faith as belief without evidence or reason; rather faith is belief without complete evidence or reason – which, of course, includes just about everything.)

In fact, a central theme I highlight under motivation and goal setting is that the future should be approached as an adventure. Psychologically, people have the complementary needs for security and stability versus risk and change. Too much of either has aversive psychological effects. But what frequently holds people back from moving into a different way of life, mode of thinking, or pursuit of new goals is an excessive need for security and a fear of change. Future consciousness is expanded through an acceptance, if not an embrace, of risk and uncertainty. Even new goals or directions should not be permanently fixed; goals should evolve as the future unfolds. Participants are asked how they deal with uncertainty or doubts which inevitably arise within any real adventure.

Under the topic of motivation I also discuss being proactive versus reactive in living one's life. Working toward goals, rather than being buffeted about by momentary external circumstances, gives human consciousness an enhanced sense of direction toward the future. Further, human motivation can be oriented toward approach or toward avoidance. Are we moving toward something preferable or are we attempting to avoid something aversive? Approach motivation is connected with hope and a positive emotional state, whereas avoidance is connected with moving away from something fearful and generates a negative emotional state. Ideally, motivational future consciousness should be connected with a positive emotional state.

Some final questions at the end of the workshop I ask participants to ponder include:

- Describe an example of deep transformational learning in your life, highlighting what fundamental changes occurred in you as a result?
- In what ways do you possess a heightened level of future consciousness? In what ways is your level of future consciousness deficient and in need of development?
- What are your greatest fears and greatest hopes?
- How are your fears interfering with the realization of your hopes? What can you do to transcend these fears?
- Describe a hopeful life/professional narrative and describe what thoughts or actions you can begin to engage in now to realize this narrative.

In the next article in this series I will examine the roles of thinking, imagination, insight, and creativity in future consciousness.