

2009 Symposium for the Future

Closing Remarks

I must confess to feeling a profound sense of vertigo as I stand here.

I've spent two days looking over the edge of tomorrow, and it has left me dizzy. My head is spinning just like the amazing sets the presenters in the coliseum used in this ground-breaking gathering.

That feeling is tied to a tinge of melancholia as well, for the symposium has now drawn to a close and the two days of intense reflection that we have all been experiencing is all but over. We looked at what we can bring to the challenges that face us all with hope, and optimism — but also with an eye to the reality of our challenges.

I've been tasked with sharing an overview of the conference as a whole, and it's a humbling task any time, but especially so here, given the level of the sessions we've seen. I honestly feel that we have collectively experienced the highest watermark yet in the application of virtual space to the exchange of substantive ideas.

I was particularly struck by the dynamics of the conference itself — the way that the speakers complemented one another, the point and counterpoint of the topics, and the way the various viewpoints have aligned and contrasted. As you now know, the presenters have been working for weeks in some cases to really try to push an environment like this to its fullest potential — it showed that powerfully — and in ways that will define how I personally think about the highest uses of virtual space from this day on.

When I stood here two days ago to open this symposium, I told the story of how this environment came to be called Hakone, and why it is styled as it is. I talked about the event in which the NMC was conceived, and how the future — the one we are living out today — looked so very different then than it has turned out. To my eye, at least, the future we have actually realized is so much richer than we could possibly even imagine 17 years ago. That gives me hope that the futures we have been envisioning over the past two days are likewise a pale image of what we will actually see in ten years, or fifteen.

The theme that brought us together for this event — the applicability of technology to the social, environmental, and educational challenges we face today and in the foreseeable future — has run consistently throughout the past two days. Like a thread in a tapestry, it has spun through and connected every one of the sessions.

What has emerged in the whole of what we have experienced, however, in session after session, is that yes, technology is part of the answer — but we cannot depend on technology alone to help us with the challenges we face.

Of far more import is our humanity and the basic strength of the human spirit. The future is about the ways we will connect our thoughts, our ideas, our passions, and our hopes.

That was Gardner Campbell's message in his extraordinary opening keynote. In a session described by many I spoke to as "pure poetry," his remarks set the tone for all that followed, with a fascinating look at how our own creativity shapes us, seen through the lenses of art, literature, and music. As Gardner helped us see, the struggles of artists in their own self expression tell us much about how we approach change and new ideas — and in the end, reassures us that we will all arrive in the future together.

In that journey, Gardner showed us, our humanity is our greatest strength. In the end, while we may indeed be part of some giant machine, as so many dystopian novelists have described — it is not mechanical.

It is our art, our literature, our music — our essential humanity — that shapes and guides us.

Each and every one of our presenters echoed Gardner's point in one way or another, and the overall impact of their presentations has, for me, created a palpable sense of possibility.

Bryan Alexander gave us a brilliant look into how science and economics can help us to discern the future. Techniques like the Delphi Process and others can help to surface the wisdom of the crowds, in ways that are both exceptional and cautionary. Peter Shoemaker followed with a one-man play in four acts, illustrating how four possible futures might play out at a distinctly human level.

Anne Haywood and Ford Cochran of the National Geographic Society showed us how they are inspiring people to understand and care about the planet. No one tells the Earth's story better, and Anne and Ford showed us some of the new ways NGS is helping to raise awareness, not only with their big highly visible efforts, but also one person at a time. Peter Whitehouse echoed that theme in a warmly human tour of the ideas behind the Intergenerational School, and how bringing together the generations can help both sides not only learn from each other, but grow and nurture each other in ways that enrich us all. Marc Canter, former CEO of Macromedia, helped us see how to do that at scale.

Ruben Puentedura gave us a fascinating tour of science fiction literature, utopias and dystopias, and how what we think about the future tells us about ourselves. He segued that context into a brilliant discussion of the American two-party system and the fallacies inherent in describing the electorate in purely binary terms. Jared Bendis picked up the baton this morning in his passionate and cautionary tale that warned us that the solutions we most need and are most able to address, are things we need now, today, not tomorrow. In this, the most important thing we have to do is do it in ways that preserve our dignity and our basic humanity.

Our second day's keynoter, Beth Kanter, gave us a glimpse of how people are using the tools that are most likely to offer the greatest impact on solving the challenges of our time — social media and social networks. She showed us how network weavers are using social networks to further the work of not-for-profits all over the globe and doing great and important things. Her work is both uplifting and encouraging, and she shared many examples of people making good things happen — and being "rhizomatic". She used Robert Frost's "The Wall" to illustrate some very insightful ideas about transparency, and open and closed networks. Frost's notion of walls both keeping people in — and out — is useful and telling at the same time. Kanter's work is helping thousands of people to change the world, for the better. Seeing her fly into the Stadium as June Jetson in her flying car was plain fun, and added a dimension to her session that kept us all on the edge of our seats.

That dimension of our experience ought to be underscored. For me, seeing the creativity expressed in the props and sets used by the presenters added greatly to my engagement, and I know from the comments many of you passed along that you felt the same way. I want to acknowledge the work of Beth Sachtjen and Chris Holden in creating all those, and all the interactivity and scripts that brought them to life. They really helped all of us see the potential of this space in a very real and compelling way.

We had the chance to see what learning might look like in the next 10-15 years from a number of perspectives, both formal and informal. The latter was the focus of a panel led by NMC Fellow Ted

Kahn that examined how museums are evolving and what implications that has for learning. Ted took us on a tour of museum and other projects, like Future Search, that highlight ways these institutions are seeing the future. A bright young teenager, Ji Yeon Bae, connected with us from Korea, and brought all these concepts to life for us in a way that made us all feel quite secure about the future.

Two related sessions focused on the more formal dimensions of learning, and each came at the topic from very different perspectives, not to mention very different presentation styles. Jeff Borden gave us a brilliant theoretical discussion of learning paths, and connecting people and the things they need to learn. He helped us see how tools like Cognos can help us mine learning data to see where the associations are, and gave us a glimpse of how learning might be structured in the not-so-far off future.

Jim Groom, Tom Woodward, and Brian Lamb created a delightful one-act virtual play that was as funny as it was insightful. As FutureMan noted, no one was counting on the Zombie Holocaust of 2012 or the apathy that followed, but Groom's insurance-hawking FutureMan made an eloquent call to action, and a strong case that we must not accept minimums as models for how we use the Internet for learning. I was powerfully struck by the counterpoint that these two sessions achieved. Two visions, powerfully rendered.

In an equally nice counterpoint to Bryan Alexander's session that opened the conference, Cynthia Calongne gave a hands on demonstration of how to think about the future, about projections, and about innovation. Her perspectives on social media and its power to bring people together were especially poignant. Her special way of engaging an audience is like no other.

I don't think I have ever attended a conference where the level of quality was as consistently excellent as that our speakers brought over the last two days. They led us well.

And for me, something quite unexpected happened as they did. We came together as a group — and it was as a group that we saw our many diverse individual impressions come together into the powerful single shared experience that all of us felt.

That's the true takeaway for me from this symposium: that the work we all do, both in our professional and our personal lives — can connect us to one another and enlarge our individual experiences in ways we can only begin to imagine.

That's where the true opportunity lies: to realize that, while we have now reached a point where the free flow of ideas for us is so much a part of our lives, so natural, almost like air — this is not at all a universal experience. The same dynamic and the connections we have experienced here are all too often lacking in the worlds of work and learning — and that is a choice we make as a society.

In the same way that Jim Groom, Brian Lamb, and Tom Woodward did in their creative and engaging session with FutureMan, I have to ask myself — what is being lost by that choice?

To me, it is mightily clear that the simple answer is — too much.

Our task going from here must be to find ways to employ the power of social media like Beth Kantor is doing, and to use those tools to magnify the results of our own efforts and those of our colleagues worldwide in the service of social good.

This conference, the annual Symposium for the Future, was convened precisely because we see that task as so important.

We recognize that the tools we count on are an important part of the solution. But we also realize that whatever the tools may be, they simply support the experiences, reflections, and social connections that are at the heart of how we learn, grow, and communicate.

Those things matter. They matter because they are reflections of all of us.

Everyone here has contributed so much to this conference, making it more than it could ever have been otherwise. Thanks are especially due to all the presenters who inspired us, and to all the people behind the scenes manning the help desks and organizing sessions. Thanks as well to the indefatigable John Howard whose patience inspires us all, and to all the NMC staff who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make this happen.

Thanks especially to all of you in the audience who brought so much by joining us. We are enriched by all your contributions, and humbled by all we have learned.

It has been a fantastic two days, and now, it is done. I am going to reprise Gardner's choice of ending, as it was so eloquent, I cannot think of a better way to bring my own thoughts to a close ...

In the words of one of the great poets of our time:

*No I won't, no I won't
No, I won't be afraid
Just as long ... as you stand
Stand by me."*

[cue music]

The 2009 NMC Symposium for the Future is now, officially, adjourned.

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