

## The World Futures Studies Federation celebrates 40 years – Bucharest 2013

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Some 29 hours and several airport transfers later, I found myself magically transported from Honolulu, Hawai'i to Bucharest, Romania. I was one of several futurists who had made the trek from Hawai'i to attend the bi-annual World Futures Studies Federation Conference. This was an important year as the federation celebrated it's 40th anniversary. Despite a healthy dose of jet lag, I arrived just in time for the opening cocktail reception and I was carried on the adrenaline of being able to mingle with some of the world's most accomplished and intelligent futurists. Under a balmy Romanian sky at the Intercontinental Hotel we gathered that first evening to begin what would prove to be an inspiring and challenging week ahead.

### Where it all began...

The World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) was born in Paris in 1973, but its conception actually happened in Bucharest in 1972. So it was more than fitting that the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organization be held in this very same city. A sense of the WFSF's history and accomplishments was palpable throughout the two and a half day event. The opening sessions included welcome speeches from Remus Pricopie, Minister of Education for Romania and Adrian Curaj, the General Director of the Executive Agency for Higher Education. They spoke of Bucharest and Romania's abiding commitment to the field of futures and to pushing forward into new paradigms of higher education. Professor Curaj outlined the work being done on an exciting new foresight engine FORWiki – a tool whose motto is “bee a visionary” [www.forwiki.ro](http://www.forwiki.ro).

The President of WFSF, Jennifer Gidley followed these opening remarks with an inspirational welcoming speech and an overview of the coming days. Recalling the important work done by the Mankind 2000 project and reveling at the foresight and relevance of the issues being discussed some 40 years ago when the organization was founded, Dr. Gidley called upon us, the conference participants, to ask ourselves, “What issues do we need to be thinking about today that will be relevant in another 40 or 50 years? How do we remain on the cutting edge?” She pressed all in attendance to understand that if we don't continue to think far ahead and to really perceive the pressing issues of the future in ways that other cannot, we as futurists will no longer be relevant. The world is moving fast and in many ways we are being commanded to move fast along with it.

And yet, here we were, physically sitting in the conference hall of a University, most of us having used an abundance of resources, both financial and physical, to get ourselves to this conference. We all sat and listened to several hours of plenary sessions and then sat and listened in breakout sessions with little chance for discussion, and only scant opportunities to really talk with one another and share thoughts, ideas, and our work. For those of us who presented work in a breakout session there were typically four or five in the audience and again little chance for feedback or discussion. It seemed that after forty years and numerous leaps in technology, not much about the overall conference structure, both physically and programmatically, had changed. In plenary discussions the issue of climate change was broached a few times, but when an audience member challenged the plenary speakers to discuss novel solutions to the issue there was no response from anyone on the panel. There were disposable plastic water bottles offered rather than asking participants to bring their own bottles to the conference. It seems that in many ways we have yet to really absorb and internalize Dr. Gidley's challenge to remain relevant as futurists. So at the end of the day, despite the inspiration and knowledge gained from these days together in Bucharest, there remains for me a distinct tension. How forward thinking are we really?

### **Keynote addresses**

After a quick coffee break and some lively mingling in the grand halls of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, we all returned to the conference hall to hear the keynote speakers. A founding father of the WFSF, the audience and conference organizers were delighted to have Johan Galtung open the conference proceedings with his keynote address, "Humankind 2050: Making Peace with our Futures." A lifelong peace activist and notable futurist, Galtung was also a key contributor to the Mankind 2000 project, which was the forerunner to the creation of the WFSF. In his address he spoke of his hopes for mankind in 2050. Sharing his desire to shift away from a focus on economics and the market and towards human beings and nature, Galtung spoke of the decline of the West as a chance for renewed vision, arguing that, where the emerging meets the declining, there is always an opportunity. Despite being an optimist myself, it seems critical that we remember - opportunities are always a matter of perspective. He spoke of the dangers of trauma and conflict and the history of colonialism that has left us with a monetized economy and a 'west is best' prevailing attitude. Calling for an end to the bank-ocracy and for a new economics that values human beings' basic needs and the dignity of nature, Galtung left the audience reverberating with his sense of hope for a future that combines the best of existing ideologies to create a new way forward.

Following Galtung was Maya vanLeemput, a professional futurist who was awarded the first WFSF President's Outstanding Woman Futurist Award this past year for her tireless work on the Congo pilot of WFSF's UNESCO Participation Project, 'World Futures Learning Lab' (LEALA). Funded by a UNESCO Participation Programme Grant, the project embraces a 'glocal' perspective - local face-to-face learning combined with the power of virtual online learning environments. Maya explained how 15 Belgian and 15 Congolese young adults spend one month together exploring images of the future. Using 21 specifically developed 'missions' the students engage futures thinking in depth and through writing, art and music. Maya ended her address with a rousing musical video created

by one of her participants, Sando, a traditional African storyteller and artist who created an original song and music video around his vision for ideal and hopeful futures.

Inspired and excited, we spent the remainder of the day listening to a series of plenary sessions on topics as varied as the futures of innovation and the work of prospectiva in Latin America. The series of back to back plenaries was fairly exhausting and there was very little chance for interaction among participants or for discussion with the speakers. With a bit of time in the afternoon for networking and introductions, we ended the day with a beautiful dinner in the cavernous and ornate halls of the National Bank of Romania hosted by the bank's Governor, a firm supporter of the WFSF.

### **Futures both fast and slow...**

The second day of the conference began with Gerd Leonhard's overview of "New Technologies in Service of People and Planet." Leonhard's scenario was one of a continued growth, high tech future, arguing for the inevitability of a networked planet where technology is able to solve the pressing problems we face. Tracking more short term trends and emerging issues, Leonhard balanced the continued growth with a triple bottom line perspective, but I found that the other potentialities for alternative futures were quite absent – energy shortages, climate change, worldwide economic depression and the like gave way to a pervasive techno-optimism. Also absent were the ramifications of ceaseless growth and technological production should we be able to continue on such a trajectory – overconsumption and the waste produced, today most felt by those living in underdeveloped states. Leonhard's presentation was a good overview of currently evolving trends, but without any analysis of potential disruptors or the fallout for those on the losing end of high-tech futures.

This glimpse of fast forward, high tech futures was paired with its polar opposite: Sirkka Heinonen's analysis of the growing movement towards "Innovations in Slow Living Futures." She presented a survey of emerging trends in slow living, slow food, slow money and all around slowness as an antidote to the breakneck pace of technological change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This call to slowness is something I have been echoing in my recent work on the futures of biotechnology. I'm interested in thinking about slowness as an ethical framework, a fading value that is almost demanded as a counter balance to the increasing speed of change. It was really interesting to see the juxtaposition of techno-optimism next to a call for slowing down in every possible way – Continued Growth vs. the Disciplined scenario.

To round out the morning plenaries, Gill Ringland spoke of her work on the recently released book "Here be Dragons," a semi-fictional work about a man trying to navigate the hectic pace of change in the modern business landscape. Then Earl DeBlonville, a famed Australian explorer and leadership coach, called upon his experience as a leader of expeditions to the Arctic to explain his theories around "Postformal Leadership for Innovative Millennials." Bringing to light the *business* of producing leaders (\$54 billion spent on corporate leadership and development for example), DeBlonville argues that we are not producing the type of leaders that can handle the types of challenges we will face in the futures and that our respect for and trust in our current leaders is at an all time low. Some of the qualities of post-formal leadership included having a higher purpose and following your intuition,

but by the end of the talk I was still left unclear as to what exactly was meant by the notion of post-formal leadership and whether he felt this type of leadership would be successful in the futures.

The remainder of the day was spent in breakout sessions where futurists spoke on a wide range of research interests and projects. By far the most well attended session was led by preeminent futurist, and a WFSF founding father, Professor Jim Dator of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He and Professor Peter Bishop from the University of Houston outlined their collaborative efforts over the last year to build a cohesive foresight curriculum for futures studies programs worldwide. They made public their vision of a type of foresight network among all the various academic futures programs. Their talk was really a call to further collaboration as they hope that many more academic futures programs will join the discussion and aid in the effort to advance the academic pursuit of futures. Other breakout sessions covered varied themes from the Health of Ecosystems to Leadership and Geopolitics, there was even discussion of the potential love interests between humans and robots. Enter Dator's 2<sup>nd</sup> law of the future: Any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous.

### **The past, present and future of futures...**

The final day of the conference began with a survey of the past, present and future of futures studies. Jenny Andersson, senior researcher at the Centre for European Studies in Paris, spoke about the history of the field of futures studies, giving a broad and extensive overview from the birth of the field through its development into what we know today. There was some disagreement to the historical survey she presented with futurists in the audience questioning some of her facts. I found that this served to highlight the need for more archival work and scholarship on the history of our field. Futurists don't usually make good archivists and without attention to the work that has come before, our heritage may be lost before it can be preserved.

Following Andersson, Riel Miller, head of foresight at UNESCO Paris, spoke about the present state of the field and what he termed building blocks of the discipline of anticipation. Calling upon futurists to ask new questions when it comes to emergence and to engage in novelty and experimentation, Riel gave a rousing review of the cutting edge research and practice going on in the futures field. Closing out the conference plenaries, Dr. Gidley spoke about "Where to Tomorrow for Futures Studies?" Challenging the futurists in the room to stretch and imagine innovative futures, and reminding us both how far we've come and how much there is left to accomplish, Dr. Gidley spoke of some of the massive and pressing challenges facing humanity including education, climate change and the rapid pace of technology.

The theme of relevance kept returning in different ways in different talks throughout the conference. How do futurists remain relevant? When the WFSF first began we didn't have any of the technology we have today. The way we do scanning work, the way we think about foresight, the pace of change, all of these factors have shifted radically since those first meetings in the 1970's. In a world where it seems that issues are literally *emerged* as they are *emerging* how do we not just keep up, but keep thinking long into the futures? How do we continue to see ahead 100 years or more to envision the issues that will affect our grandchildren and their children

when massive change is happening so quickly? These questions and themes seemed to haunt the halls around us.

After one last breakout session and another Romanian buffet lunch in the cafeteria with lively conversations at every table, we all returned to the main conference hall for the closing ceremonies. Three young futurists were invited to give their impressions of the conference. Alithea Baena Montero from Mexico, John Sweeney from Hawai'i and Mihaela Ghisa of Romania each gave thanks for the opportunity to be part of such a momentous event and expressed their hope and vision for the futures of the World Futures Studies Federation. The remainder of the day was spent in the WFSF General Assembly where ideas about a WFSF Youth Leadership Council and a rejuvenation of short course foresight workshops were discussed.

With bursting brains and full hearts, I would say that most everyone left Romania feeling inspired and hopeful about the future of futures. The somewhat archaic model of the academic conference had in many ways served its purpose. Despite the capabilities of technology, there is still something significant about face-to-face contact, having a drink in the evening, talking in the hallways about passions and work. When it is so easy in our day to day lives to get stuck in the narrow confines of our own work, here in Bucharest we were all reminded of the vast interests and experiences of our colleagues and the amazing work being done out there in the world. I think it is safe to say that all participants left feeling proud to be a part of this weird and wacky futures community and imbued with a sense of responsibility to carry forward the field of futures studies and foresight. The overarching message woven throughout all the sessions and events – the world needs futurists who are doing good work. Now perhaps more than ever.

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