

Being a Datorling

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Writing about Jim Dator was truly one of the toughest things that I have ever done; I struggled with this for weeks and I was full of doubt as I wrote and rewrote the lines below. Writing about my father would not have been so challenging but, then again, in many senses, Jim is my spiritual father. I have said it many times: Jim is one of the most influential people in my life. In my professional and academic life, surely he has been the most influential. In other words, if my father was key in understanding how I am in body and character, Jim was equally key to comprehend the futurist in me.

There was a time in which Jim embodied all that I wanted to be, or to become, particularly because when I first met him I was a teenager and he showed me a path to follow, one that was both intellectually promising and personally rewarding. Later on, we developed a sort of spiritual father-son relationship and now, almost thirty years later after our first encounter, I think I have gained some distance to be fair in assessing my relationship with him.

Do not get me wrong, it would be so easy, so totally easy, to engage in a laudatory piece to tell about all the great things Jim has done, in general, and for me, specifically. I could easily write something to take advantage of the opportunity to thank him, because it is unlikely that he will give me any other chance to do so. But at the same time it would not be true to his character, it would not be true to Jim. His real dimension does not come from the scope of his work, achievements or public relevance; it comes from his modesty and his integrity. I do not want to talk about the Jim who has travelled around the world and seduced audiences with his speeches and insight; I would rather let you know about the Jim who spends countless hours responding to every single demand, question, or petition from people from all around the world, the Jim who prefers to log in to check his mail instead of going out for drinks; the Jim who has popcorn for lunch at his office while working. Very few people whom I know have a comparable moral spine; yet this is something that often goes unnoticed because he hides it behind a humorous projection of himself. Jim has a sharp sense of self-deprecating humor; I would say that every single time that someone takes him too seriously or too transcendently he returns a joke usually underlined with a grin.

Jim is a hard worker: he is dangerously close to being a workaholic. He is a caring person and a very decent human being. And it would seem that he is afraid of letting that be known. So instead he prefers to be known as the robot lover freak that wears that ridiculous Prince Valiant haircut. And while the haircut may appear odd, who could picture Jim with any other hairstyle? The very first time I met him, I was at the Barcelona airport waiting for

his arrival, in November 1983. I cannot say what I was expecting, but never in my wildest dreams could I have anticipated that mixture of a Hells Angel and Prince Valiant. That much black and leather did not match the hair, but then that's Jim: a constant effort to challenge other people's expectations about him. One day I will have to ask Jim if my face showed the shock of the moment, as he certainly caught me off guard; I do clearly remember thinking in the taxi in our way to the hotel, "Oh my God, what a haircut!" Anyway, Jim got to me soon enough: in the moment I first heard him giving (or should I say performing?) a presentation, he captured me. When he invited me to the Futures Studies international course in Dubrovnik he sealed my destiny. It was in Dubrovnik that I decided to be a futurist; it took me ten more years to achieve it, but I finally made it. Whether that is for better or for worse, I leave to others to judge, but Jim has undoubtedly a large responsibility for the fact.

So, yes, I am a Datorling and, to be frank, quite proud of it; if I may say so, irrationally proud of it. After all, it is not like enjoying the privileges of a select club, and it certainly does not give you any sort of advantage. Indeed, sometimes even to the contrary it brings the disdain Jim raises in some people. Up to a point, it is like the attachment some people feel for their birthplace. Regardless of how crappy or kitsch it could be, they will always be proud of having been borne there. In my case, I consider the datorling label as a badge of honor. It required much for me to become one of his students; earning the degree was hard work. I earned it and if someone wants to call me datorling, so be it.

Zia Sardar told me recently that Jim is somewhat of a tragic figure because none of his students has reached a similar authoritative position in the field, apart, perhaps, from Sohail Inayatullah. Although that hurt, it also made me think a lot. I could rationalise it by noting that it is often the case that great thinkers' disciples seldom attain the status of their masters; in a similar line of reasoning, many times it is difficult for the son to walk in his famous father's shoes (and I bet that Zia's children may have something to say on that score). Zia has a point, but Jim cares a lot about his students and I know that he would like to see all of us in the best possible position with the maximum recognition. It must make him sad to see that some of us are still struggling to attain the credit he thinks we deserve. But, to put it bluntly: has he prepared us well?

To answer this question it is necessary to analyze Jim's program at the University of Hawai'i. In many senses, Jim's program is quite unusual; unlike others that mostly focus on the methods of futures studies, the University of Hawai'i at Manoa futures program devotes a great deal of time to expose its students not only to futures studies methods, but also to its history, theories, and schools of thought. I would say that Jim wants to make sure that his students get to know the richness within the field and that they could then choose by themselves their particular path in the discipline. The only problem with such an arrangement is that it makes the program weak in terms of setting up a specific methodological approach. The Manoa School's most distinctive trait is not having a particular methodological doctrine. Some people may object to this and may claim that the Manoa approach is incasting, the method that Jim and Graham Molitor developed years ago. And it is true that incasting is important for the Manoa School, but I would argue that the real interest in using incasting is not really to provide a methodological path to engage in futures research but to emphasize the centrality of thinking about the future in plural terms. I would say that for Jim, futures studies is mostly about looking at

the future as alternative possibilities. If you think about it, incasting does not really offer a systematic way to research the future, as it does not really provide its user with a frame in which he can go farther and farther into the future. The only thing that incasting does is to force its user to consider alternative standpoints to look into the future. Moreover, incasting does not give any clue to the feasibility of any given future, it says nothing about how disruptive any given future may be. One of the few things that can be said with certainty about incasting is that scenario development is guided in a coherent way according to predetermined images. Incasting is about making sure that the future will be considered in alternative terms and, therefore, that the future will not be considered as a single prediction. It could be concluded that the Manoa School's greatest strength is conceptual—theoretical and philosophical, while its main weakness is methodological. As for the program students, they may end with a superficial exposure to many methods, but it may be that some of them do not learn them well enough. In this regard the Hawaii program may not be the first choice for someone who would try to pursue a career as a consultant, but it is sure a great place if you want to dive into the epistemological, social, and political implications of futures studies.

So, at this point I find myself again puzzled by the question: did he prepare me well for my career as a futurist? After considering it thoroughly, I would say yes. He taught the principles, the philosophy if you will; but above all, he showed me the responsibility, the great responsibility that comes with an appreciation of what may happen in the future. In my case, I have learned the methods that I need in my professional work and have developed my own methodological approach. My life might have been easier had Jim reinforced the methodological side of his program. But, there are many programs that primarily focus on methods, and so few that concentrate on concepts and principles, so I would rather have it this way.

Now we all realize that Jim is entering into his final scene; it is in this sense an end of an era. He has been a colossus, restlessly working to promote the discipline. Perhaps he is wondering if his legacy will reflect all of his efforts. Perhaps it is because of this that lately I have detected a subtle note of bitterness in some of his speeches and papers. Yet, he should find solace in the fact that he has touched many lives, and some of them, like mine, have been changed fundamentally because of meeting him.

To Jim, just for once, I am able to say it without him trying to stop me or to deny it: thanks man, thanks a lot! But...that haircut ? Come on!

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