

Jim Dator: The Living Embodiment of Futures Studies

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On December 10, 2005, approximately 25 people gathered in UH-Manoa's Saunders Hall to help envision a preferred future for the Hawai'i Research Center for Futures Studies (HRCFS; the Center). Jim Dator was not present.

The majority of the group included current students (such as myself), but many futures alumni and individuals in the extended network of HRCFS advocates were also present. The Center, and the futures studies "program" within the Department of Political Science, were going through a significant bureaucratic, financial transformation. Moreover, there was a sense that the mission and meaning of the Center was in the midst of a big change. At least it felt so to us at the time—maybe that is a perpetual state of affairs. Those who participated were personally invested in helping imagine and create a long and prosperous future for the Center.

The Hawai'i Research Center for Futures Studies (and its unwieldy acronym) was created in 1971 by the Hawai'i State Legislature, which still basked in the afterglow of the Hawai'i 2000 initiative. The Center's mandate was to "to collect and disseminate information about futures studies and to do futures research for public and private groups within the State, the region, and throughout the world" (Dator, Hamnett, Nordberg, & Pintz, 1999). It was to be led by a weird, long-haired newcomer from Virginia (or Japan or someplace) who had been active in Hawai'i 2000 and had been going around the islands talking about futures studies, Buckminster Fuller, and all sorts of other crazy ideas. Who better? Throughout its now 40 years of existence, that same weird, slightly grayer (and shorter) haired old-timer, Jim Dator, has been at the helm.

The introduction of the HRCFS and the visioning workshop, the results of which I will discuss below, are simply a way into the story of my life-changing experience learning from and working alongside Jim Dator.

The Quantum Jim

My entanglement with Jim began in Auburn, Alabama in 1994, nine years before I met him. It started with a strange pre-publication manuscript I found at the bottom of a box of books. Back in the age when people read and traded used books, I thought that it was an embarrassment that neither Auburn University nor the city of Auburn had a proper used bookstore anywhere in town or on campus. So, during my freshman year, some friends and

I endeavored to change this by starting one ourselves. One day I came to the store and found several boxes of books on our doorstep. This was a common occurrence, as many professors assuaged their guilt over throwing away books by “donating” them to us instead. And, as there hadn’t been a used bookstore in Auburn for quite some time, there was a large back catalogue of guilt removal that had to be done. Nevertheless, one of these books changed my life.

The book in question had a sort of ‘do-it-yourself’ binding job and triple line spacing. It was titled “New Physics, New Politics,” edited by Theodore J. Becker. In it were a series of essays (or, more accurately, thought experiments) around a set of core ideas. These ideas were that:

- 1) Newtonian physics was the cosmological basis of the U.S. Constitution,
- 2) Newtonian physics had been shown to be wrong, or at best, a highly limited theory of the world, and had been subsumed by other, newer physical theories,
- 3) the U.S. Constitution, and systems of government based on it, were systemically dysfunctional, or at least severely limited in their capacities to deal with governance issues of today and tomorrow, and
- 4) a new paradigm, one based on the latest physics and cosmologies, in particular quantum mechanics, might be necessary in order to build functional and fair governance systems in the 21st century.

The book, in its final published form, was called *Quantum Politics: Applying Quantum Theory to Political Phenomenon* (Becker, 1991). The book’s premise, and the originality of the authors’ approaches, permanently expanded my mind. Jim Dator, however, was not present.

While I stayed on my prior academic path in the field of anthropology, the idea of quantum politics always haunted me. Finally, after receiving my MA, and at my own intellectual crossroads, I went back and started re-reading everything I had previously found most interesting. This time, when I read *Quantum Politics*, I knew that the kind of thinking expressed in the volume was exactly what I wanted to be doing as well. I contacted the editor, Ted Becker, who, unbeknownst to me at the time, was a political science professor at Auburn. He had previously been at the University of Hawai’i. I asked him if I should come back to Auburn in order to do quantum politics. He quickly and strongly assured me that coming back to Auburn would be a bad idea. Instead, he suggested, I should read the work of Jim Dator, who taught “futures studies” at the University of Hawai’i. This was surprising, I thought, since there was no chapter by Dator in the book, although he was mentioned a few times. Nevertheless, I began to read Jim’s work, and knew almost immediately that he was the person with whom I was going to work. That was 2001, and the rest, I suppose, was to be my wonderful, ridiculous future.

The Living Embodiment

Back to the 2006 HRCFS visioning workshop: The conversations we had that day about the HRCFS, about Jim, about all of our experiences with futures thinking and practicing futures work were honest, enlightening, and productive. One of the goals we set for ourselves was to come up with a vision statement for the Center. There were suggestions for many of the kinds of valid and honorable things one often hears in futures circles: to help people make better decisions; to provoke long-term thinking; and to represent future generations. But, near the end, and a true case of emergence from a group of minds, we came upon the formulation that

best captured our feeling about the Center and our aspirations for it in the futures universe. Posed as a vision statement, we agreed that the HRCFS would strive to be “the living embodiment of futures studies.”

It was a moment that induced in me, and I think I can safely say did the same for most of those present, a feeling of exhilaration and awe. The feeling of awe “reorients the mind toward interconnection and design” observed U.C. Berkeley psychologist Dacher Keltner (2009) from his studies of positive emotions (p. 263) We all left the workshop re-oriented—even more focused and committed to designing a better future for the HRCFS and the futures program. It was a seminal moment in my experience in Hawai’i.

As I look back, I’ve come to realize that the vision we generated that day was made possible, and indeed was already manifested, in the person of Jim Dator. To me, that statement, “the living embodiment of futures studies,” is the best description I’ve heard for Jim. And so, by way of a lengthy preamble, I come to the thesis of this essay: Jim Dator, in thought and action, is the living embodiment of futures studies. He embodies the concept of *aiglatson* coined by the theologian Gabriel Fackre (date), and a concept frequently lauded by Jim in his writing and lectures. *Aiglatson*, nostalgia spelled backwards, is a deep and emotional yearning for the future.

The rest of this piece will explore not so much Dator’s theoretical, methodological, or institutional contributions to the field of futures studies, although they are unparalleled. Instead, I want to try to convey, as best I can from my experience learning from, alongside, and with Jim as a student, research assistant, and professional colleague, his intellectual style, character, humor, sensibility, and orientation toward life—in other words, his *aiglatson*. As Dator (1972) notes, no one has a “hot line to the future,” but his approach to living *aiglatson* is a model worth emulating. Ultimately, I’d like to try to convey aspects of his way of being that show what embodiment of futures actually looks and feels like. I know I cannot give a complete picture, and it may not even be an accurate picture to some, but I will attempt to be honest to my own experience. As a habitual iconoclast, however, I am sensitive to the indulgences of hagiography, and I hope readers will forgive me if I happen to veer to close to it, although I know Jim won’t.

The Fabulous Dr. Dator

In theater, the old star actors never liked to come in until the end of the first act. Mister Wu is a classic example—I’ve played it once myself. All the other actors boil around the stage for an hour shrieking, “what will happen when Mr. Wu arrives?” “What is he like, this mister Wu?,” and so on. Finally, a great gong is beaten, and slowly over a Chinese bridge comes Mister Wu himself in full mandarin robes. Peach Blossom (or whatever her name is) falls on her face and a lot of coolies yell “Mr. Wu!!!” The curtain come down, the audience goes wild, and everybody says, “Isn’t that guy playing Mr. Wu a great actor!” that’s a star part for you! What matters in that kind of role is not how many lines you have, but how few. What counts is how much the other characters talk about you. (Welles, 1998, pp. 220-221)

I’ve been using the rhetorical device of “presence” to capture Jim’s remarkable ability to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Jim could enter and exit a meeting with such speed that one thought he might possess a teleportation device. I’ve run into so many people from disparate parts of life who’ve met him or seen him speak that it seems everyone knows him. And yet, he is still unknown within vast

circles of futures-interested people who SHOULD know him. He is the most well-known unknown person I know.

Presence also applies to time, and Jim is a man who is firmly locked in the present, conducting his work quickly and efficiently—answering emails seconds after they are sent! Yet, he has also distributed himself throughout time, from his early scholarly interest in medieval history to his decades of life projecting his mind into alternative futures.

I included the Orson Welles' quote above because it captures the essence of a festschrift, this volume of text being created by Jim's students and colleagues in which the subject is imbued throughout, but does not have a voice. It is no coincidence that Orson Welles directed *Citizen Kane*, a movie in which a man's life story is told through the eyes of those around him. Yet again, Jim is not present, but he is everywhere.

The Mr. Wu/*Citizen Kane* element is not just simply generated by the collective act of writing for this volume. Those of us who have had the privilege of Jim's presence spend a great deal of time talking about him: how he would think about an issue, what he might say in this or that situation. What Would Jim Do? If what counts is how much the other "characters" talk about you, then Jim is certainly playing the star part in that regard. Ultimately, Jim's impact will be counted by how much of the future comes to resemble his way of being, and in that regard, we'd all be better off if that amount continues to rise.

Life with Jim

Bang a gong, finally, Jim arrives! Most of my time with Jim was spent sitting at a desk just outside his office on the 6th floor of Saunders Hall. I was a research assistant for the Center starting in 2005, but my first year was spent in a tiny, attic-like office on the 7th floor of the building—away from Jim's office, and most other living humans for that matter. In a very fortunate bit of bureaucratic re-arrangement, the Center was moved to a larger space below, one that now also included Jim's office (a change from his long-held spot next to the elevators—elevators that he never used). The outer office quickly became populated by wild-eyed futures folks, including Stuart Candy, Aaron Rosa, Cyrus Camp, Shanah Trevenna, and many others over the years. We made that space our guerilla futures headquarters and mountain retreat.

There are many grand stories from Jim's work: his foundational role in the establishment of academic futures studies (the training of thousands of futures students), his development of the alternative futures methodology, his leadership in the World Futures Studies Federation, and his significant scholarly and institutional contributions (including political science, media studies, architecture, political systems design, space and society, judicial foresight, and higher education). A book could be written on his impact on each one of those fields. On top of this, and possibly the most impressive example of Jim's futurist bona fides, is that his doctoral dissertation on governance structure and process in the Episcopal Church was published, for the first time, a full 50 years after he wrote it (Dator & Nunley, 2010)!

But, I want to paint a portrait with smaller brush strokes: the little habits, observations, bits of history, and pieces of insight from working next to Jim. I learned as much about being a futurist listening to Jim explain futures to a clueless

journalist as I did attending his courses and writing research papers. It was in the interstitial moments that I most came to understand Jim and how futures thinking imbues a life. Those lessons conveyed in the expression of kind frustration after hanging up the phone with those clueless journalists, in the stories about the characters he met at conferences in his (to this day) ridiculously packed travel schedule, how he tried to decline invitations without really saying “no,” and in his proud reports about his kids and grandkids.

It was also in these daily moments and bits of biography thrown around as conversational asides that I learned about Jim’s remarkable life and motivations. His father drowned when Jim was a toddler, and he was raised by his mother and aunt in Florida. He attended the 1939 World’s Fair in New York as a young boy. He performed as a water-skiing acrobat in high school and college. He played football at Stetson University. While a graduate student in D.C., he got up at 4 am so he could learn Russian from a show on public television. He shared a duplex while teaching at Virginia Tech with David Green, a member of the Archigram group, who told him, “you sound like Bucky Fuller”— a person Jim had not heard of at the time. Jim doesn’t read science fiction, but does read poetry. He doesn’t know where the name “Dator” comes from, and has a passionate disinterest in his genealogy. He is a surprisingly good rapper (I’ve seen the tape). He introduced and provided commentary on episodes of Dr. Who for TV Ontario, and once in the nude!

During one of these Dr. Who commentaries, Jim, clothed, summarized a character in the show as someone who “took his work seriously, but not himself.” This perfectly describes Jim, as well. The lightness of being that Jim exudes, even in the face of challenges both personal and civilizational, create that necessary distance needed to understand broader context and to be inclusive of differing points of view and approaches to solving those challenges. Jim often describes the future as a safe place for discussion, far enough away from present passions to re-direct attention to a wider range of possibility space in order to discover common ground. Jim’s manner of speaking and being facilitates the very same thing.

One and Many Jims

Jim preaches plurality in creed and deed, and evinces a multiplicity of unusual and initially unexpected preferences. He is a divergent thinker, and this divergence is holographically distributed in everything he does. Jim lives in Waikiki, one of the most over-developed and tourist-schlock ridden zones on the islands, and loves it. He’s written on the beauty of trash. He is a prophet of uncertainty and change, yet he has military regularity in his schedule. He wakes before dawn and walks around Waikiki, then usually works, and writes from home. In the afternoon, he rides to Manoa on his 30-year old Honda Motorcycle (named Aiko Honda) and always takes the stairs to the sixth floor. He comes into the office with a greeting for us: “hello, hello, the future is here!,” opens the window (which would not have been an option if he hadn’t argued against the permanently closed window that were part of the original building plans), and fires up his computer (a several-years-out-of-date Apple desktop).

Then, most days, there is a steady stream of students, emails, and phone calls. I can think of no times when Jim refused a student, colleague, journalist, or anyone else with a request for his time. He is the most practicing egalitarian and democratic human being I’ve ever met. There is a respect for others’ views, their motivations,

even their borderline insane ideas. He listens to them all. That is not to say he is infinitely patient. While he rarely refused to see anyone, one of my favorite games would be to recognize the decreasingly subtle cues Jim gave when he was “done” with a conversation. A few sensitive souls would get the message, and wrap up their remarks, and leave him in peace. The majority, however, would not take the hints, and would continue with their questions or commentary, forcing Jim to engage in verbal back-flips to try to extricate himself from the conversation without a directly saying “get out.” Usually it would be profuse “thank you’s” that indicated it was time for the guest to leave.

In this way, and not just in dealing with guests who overstay their welcome, he is a jujitsu master. I’m not sure if it was his interest in and experience living in Japan, the fact that he was raised without the burden of males, or some other aspect of his nature, but his way of dealing with conflict has never relied on aggression or confrontation. As someone whose manner might be described by the daoist term *wu wei*, sometimes translated as “effortless effort,” he rarely inflicts emotional, symbolic, or any other kinds of violence on a situation or interaction. In department politics, scholarly debates, or in public discourse, he rarely allows himself to be put in a position of direct confrontation, and yet is seemingly always in a position of strength.

There is usually a conditional phrase, a nod to someone else’s opinion, an embrace of intellectual transparency that allows him to surf along a power dynamic, and never be inundated by the wave. But, not always. Confrontation does happen occasionally, as I witnessed Jim and a justice on the California Supreme Court butt heads over the idea that useful futures work should appear to be ridiculous. With budget cuts and high political drama in the state, the potential perception that the courts were funding an explicitly “ridiculous” project was too much for the justice to bear. And yet Jim, to the point of discomfort for some of us in the room, refused to capitulate to a more conservative approach, or use a more placating word to describe the goal of the research. As the “ridiculous” argument demonstrated to me, Jim’s priorities and allegiances always bend toward respecting the future and doing useful futures work, above and beyond the crackpot politics and fears of the present.

While his persona engenders a long-term consilience, I have also never met a person more challenging and provocative in his ideas. His lectures are passionate and often comedic performances. The divergent, weird, and provocative thinking that he has allowed himself is almost always accepted (or at least tolerated) by others. If his non-conformity offends, it seems to be the productive kind of offense. His provocations never seem to stop thought, only accelerate it, even in those who disagree with him. That is a rare and fascinating skill to watch in action.

Inventing Jim

I’ve briefly reviewed the ways Jim embodies many core futures concepts and practices: thoughtful provocation, non-violent exploration, diversity and plurality, a healthy irreverence and love of the absurd, and an intimate distance to present time and place. The one lesson that is on continual repeat inside my mind is Jim’s refrain: “society is a social invention, and you are social inventors.” He has devoted much of his life to trying to get inventors of physical things to give more attention to the invention of social things. The responsibility that we have to make the future, and make it better, is contained in all of Jim’s utterances, all of his writing, all of his

work, and in every interaction I've witnessed. Jim's personality and the way he goes about his work are certainly constructions (both intentional and unintentional), but they are completely authentic ones.

To conclude, I'd like to offer a uniquely Datorian quote from Jim from a recent conversation on the World Futures Studies Federation listserv about humanity's failures to address our most important global challenges. The quote captures everything I love about Jim: his honesty, humor, pathos, absurdity, fearlessness, and clarity. While some of us in the present may regret humanity's crimes, he wrote, "Future generations have informed me that they do not accept our apologies. That we are selfish, disgraceful twits who are better off dead and forgotten" (J. Dator, personal communication, June 15, 2011).

If future generations are cursing their selfish, disgraceful ancestors, then part of the reason will be because not enough people knew about Jim Dator and his work, and it shall be we who need to apologize.

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