

Association of Former UNESCO Staff members (AFUS)
Memory & Future Club
Transforming the Future: anticipation in the 21st Century

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Since 2012, UNESCO has been pioneering an action-learning/action-research approach to: a) discovering the diversity of anticipatory systems and processes that shape why and how people 'use-the-future'; b) co-creating local Futures Literacy capabilities; c) expanding perceptions of the present and sparking new questions of direct relevance to local actors; and d) improving the tools for diffusing and researching Futures Literacy. The Routledge/UNESCO publication [Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century](#) presents key findings from this work and points to the critical role Futures Literacy plays in addressing the challenges of the 21st Century.

On this issue, the Memory and Future Club of AFUS invited Riel Miller, Head of Futures Literacy at UNESCO and the originator of the concept of Futures Literacy Laboratories, as well as one of the world's authorities on the theory and practice of using the future to change what people see and do. An accomplished keynote speaker and facilitator, he first answered a few questions related to his work before opening a free discussion with the floor.

You have developed the concept of Futures literacy. Can you explain what it is, what it means ?

I began my career in Paris with the OECD in 1982, coming from the New School for Social Research in New York, where I received a PHD in Economics (in 1987). One of the things that struck me then was that the forecasts that we were producing at the OECD, which at the time were the most reputable in the world, were known to be inaccurate. Still the heads of state that were visiting the OECD presented them as something we could count on. Indeed, because at the time these forecasts could move markets, the OECD deployed a double security system for people handling these 'credible' predictions. As some will remember, in 1982, inflation was high and the economy was pretty volatile. Still people wanted to believe in the forecasts. And leaders presented these projections as true. It was then that I realized that images of the future are powerful and since people want to bet on it they will even use forecasts they know to be erroneous. That was the beginning of my effort to understand why and how we use the future. For well over thirty years now, I have been exploring this question: what is the future?

Eventually this led to the concept of Futures literacy as a capability, as I became aware that there are actually different kinds of future. Futures that are ontologically distinct. For the most part people are unaware of these distinctions. Unaware of the different kinds of futures we end up conflating ideologies and forecasts, uncertainties and probabilities. Failing entirely to understand complexity as a state or condition, and instead thinking of it as something we can dial-up or dial-down. This has powerful consequences: if people depend on the future and don't know what kind of future they are contemplating, it seeds not only confusion but also anxiety and fear. Futures illiteracy leads to all kinds of worries, excessive ambitions to control tomorrow, inflated expectations of planning, all ways of using-the-future that are an invitation to failure and disappointment. Not to mention a profound alienation from the fundamentally complex, creative and evolutionary nature of the world we are part of.

The more I worked with governments, companies and communities to design processes to think about the future, the more I realized that 'using-the-future' is a competency. The ability to understand the different reasons and methods for imagining the future. Of course this raises the challenge of defining the different elements that make someone more or less futures literate. For

this we need tools that reveal the anticipatory systems and processes that make up the constituent elements of ‘using-the-future’. We need tools that make the invisible visible. Just like microscopes help us to see bacteria in a drop of water, making otherwise invisible organisms visible. Identifying the anticipatory assumptions that enable people to imagine the future provides the analytical framework that conceives Futures literacy as an umbrella that encompasses the diversity of reasons and methods for imagining the future, all the way from forecasting and scenario planning to divination, all different approaches to imagining the future.

You say that Futures literacy is a capability. Is it accessible to everyone ? How is this capability relevant for development? How might being ‘futures literate’ contribute to people’s efforts to improve their lives ?

Absolutely, it is accessible to everyone. This is because the root or source of Futures Literacy is a fundamental attribute of all life. Single celled organisms, trees, cats and obviously humans, all deploy anticipatory systems and processes. People use these systems and processes all the time, to cross the street or make bets. Through learning-by-doing, meaning getting people to actually engage with their anticipatory systems, the cultivation of Futures Literacy is accessible to all.

As for development, the key contribution of Futures Literacy is that it enables a more effective relationship between human agency and complexity. This advance reflects a few things that happened in the scientific world, first of all a better understanding of complexity as a fundamental condition (not more or less) in a creative universe, and second the elaboration of new conceptual foundations for human agency as proposed by the capability approach of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. This has enabled new ways of thinking about the relationship between capability and freedom, or human agency in a complex, creative universe. Such developments in the social sciences have coincided with changes in our aspirations, our desire to respect and foster diversity, to deploy tools that facilitate access and interaction, all of which puts even greater emphasis on the need to create and negotiate shared meaning.

Which is why Futures Literacy, the capacity to more fully understand why and how to imagine the future, is a key practical ingredient for living in today’s world. When you are able to appreciate that the future can be imagined for different reasons and in different ways, that complexity and fundamental uncertainty are basic conditions of existence in this universe, then you are in a better position to reduce anxiety about the future, appreciate novelty, and understand the fears and hopes that inform trust and common cause. And because everyone uses-the-future all the time, the best way to learn about futures literacy is by doing – meaning engaging in structured action learning activities.

This is the design premise for the 70+ Futures Literacy Laboratories co-created by UNESCO since 2012 (see: [Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century](#), free download). These custom, co-designed events are real laboratories, structured experiential processes that enable participants to experiment with ‘using-the-future’. Futures Literacy Labs are a way to introduce people to the fact that they can imagine the future on the basis of their own assumptions rather than ones they have borrowed from the past or somewhere else. These Labs cultivate people’s Futures Literacy by creating a set of distinct contexts for practicing, playing with the imaginary future. Like learning how to read and write, practice helps.

The design principles that shape the co-creation of Futures Literacy laboratories emerged from my role as an architect of processes for thinking about the future. I started testing different designs beginning in 1988 when I was responsible for a project in Ontario called Vision 2000 – an effort to think about the future of the community college system. In my role as designer of processes for thinking about the future I quickly realised that most of the time the expectation of Governments, NGOs, corporations, etc. is that when we think about the future we are going to look into trends, models, predictions. So that is where Futures Literacy Labs start, with exercises that invite people to make their implicit models and forecasts explicit. Once they do that, they begin to realize that their images of the future are relatively weak and not very convincing. This is not particularly surprising given that few people exercise their imagination or pay much attention to the specific narrative and analytical frames they use to invent their descriptions of imaginary tomorrows. Which is why Futures Literacy Labs are designed to give participants an opportunity to build their awareness of why and how to imagine the future.

The more I tested processes designed to reveal the different reasons and methods for imagining the future the more I realized that it was possible to diversify the anticipatory systems and processes being used to generate plans, hopes, fears and, more generally, perceptions of the world around us. Along the way I gradually became a professional futurist. I joined the boards of the Association of the Professional Futurists and the World Futures Studies Federation. I served, and continue to serve, on the editorial boards of number of the main academic journals in the Futures Studies field. During this time one of the things I realized was that most reports providing images of the future ended up sitting on shelves. In other words, after a lot of effort coming up with scenarios or forecasts the impact seemed rather modest. Given the importance of the future, particularly setting goals for planning, this didn't seem to make much sense. And yet, gradually it became clear that the 'problem' was what was being expected of a futures exercise. As is always the case, defining achievement requires a metric, a way to measure or determine if the expected result has been realized or not. In the case of images of the future, the metrics were related to planning or setting targets and roadmaps for getting to the imagined future. Turning the imaginable into the probable. This expectation does not sit well with the formal position of most professional futurists who constantly remind clients and the public that the future cannot be predicted. Indeed most forecasts of complex systems are not convincing enough to get people to place bets or make plans. No wonder futures exercises disappoint if the expectation is that somehow, contrary to what we know about our universe, we will discover 'the future' or 'futures' – desirable or undesirable – that can be engineered to happen.

As it turns out, everything in this universe, on different time scales, is complex, fundamentally open and creative, characterized by being unknowable in advance. Of course, this does not stop us from anticipating the future on the basis of a set of assumptions that simplify and reduce the world to models and parameters that are complicated rather than complex. We do this all the time, indeed in order to come to this talk you used the future and made a series of assumptions about the future in order to select a mode of transport, show up at a specific time, etc. However, once we take an anticipatory systems perspective it becomes clear that using the future 'for the future' is not the only way to exploit our amazing capacity to imagine. Anticipation for emergence offers other reasons and methods for imagining the future. This other approach to imagining the future offers a way to embrace uncertainty by realizing that the so far unfamiliar phenomena that are continuously emerging in our creative universe, and upending best laid plans, are easier to sense and make sense of when we are not fixated on planning the future.

Futures Literacy, by diversifying the reasons and methods for imaging the future, enables people to become more comfortable with complexity, more confident that novelty – the expression of fundamental uncertainty – can be a resource rather than a threat. That spontaneity and improvisation, nourished by experimentation and change, can allow us to reconcile human agency with complexity. Instead of trying to be masters of the universe, the colonizers of tomorrow, engineers of what will be, we walk on two legs, anticipation for the future AND for emergence. Plus, the good news, is that Futures Literacy Labs are designed to give participants a first feel of what it is like to 'walk on two legs'. The Labs use learning by doing as a way to develop Futures Literacy as a competency that allows people to see and act in different ways.

You have designed and organized more than 70 Futures literacy laboratories in 25 different countries: do you have an assessment at this stage of their effectiveness and their impact? Have you been able to build a community of practice around them ?

It has been a shoestring operation, but it resonates and spreads. For example, we ran an [All Africa Futures Forum](#) UNESCO event in collaboration with the Millenium Project in South Africa a few year ago and on that occasion we ran a basic learning-by-doing Futures Literacy Laboratory. Following this, Aidan Eyakuze, who is the author of one of the 14 case studies presented in [Transforming the Future, Anticipation in the 21st Century](#), organized a series of Futures Literacy labs using Futures Literacy tools to prepare the 2015 general election in Tanzania. Another example, also a case study in the book, involved running Labs in four different cities in Manabí, a province on the coast of Ecuador. Another case study presents work undertaken between 2013 and 2017 in Norway where the Ministry of Innovation and Technology organized several sectoral labs using the Futures Literacy approach to engage in policy learning and policy development. I should also mention that one of our first Future Literacy Laboratories held here at UNESCO was

on the future of research in cultural heritage preservation. It was a European Commission project aimed at developing a Strategic Research Agenda for the field of cultural heritage, with a horizon of 10–20 years. Participants made it clear that the Lab played a key role in reformulating their strategic agenda.

Futures Literacy Labs are only one tool amongst many that facilitate the exploration of anticipatory systems and processes or what we call the competency of Futures Literacy. Other techniques, from historical review of ‘past futures’ to narrative analysis of myths, offer ways to research and understand the frames of our imagination. What makes Futures Literacy Laboratories attractive is that the design principles that shape the actual processes undertaken on the ground have been extensively field tested and have a proven track record of efficiently and effectively cultivating capacity. Labs are a relatively low-cost methodology for engaging in both research and learning related to locally authentic and meaningful anticipatory systems and processes. Of course, there are different degrees of sophistication and cost in the design and implementation of Futures Literacy Labs. Indeed, much of our current work is focused on refining the design principles, manuals and playbooks for diffusion, but also the relevant evaluation and research frameworks. After all, the study and application of Futures Literacy and the diversity of underlying anticipatory systems and processes is a relatively new field.

In this regard it is worth pointing out that it was only a bit over a decade ago that I became aware of the work of Robert Rosen, a mathematical biologist who published a book in 1985 that proposed a theory of living organisms as "anticipatory systems". Once you begin to think of life as a relational, dynamic concept, you realize that there are anticipatory systems in all life forms. A protozoa in a Petri dish will move towards sugar to survive. When a tree loses its leaves, a cat waits for a mouse, a baby cries for food, these are all fundamental manifestations of anticipatory systems and processes in living systems. Constitutive aspects of life, but also fundamental attributes of consciousness (expectations, feelings of fear, hope, happiness) are related to these anticipatory processes. It is on this basis that Futures Literacy is defined as the ability to understand and deploy anticipatory systems and processes.

Research into Futures Literacy and the vast range of underlying anticipatory systems and processes is now gaining speed. The fact that we were able in the last few years to establish 11 new UNESCO chairs is indicative of the interest the field is generating. At present, we are developing ten more chairs, in China, Russia, Kenya, Austria, etc. This is a clear sign of the resonance of UNESCO’s work as a global laboratory of ideas around Futures Literacy and anticipatory systems. Through on the ground activities like Futures Literacy Labs UNESCO is catalyzing innovation at a practical level. Through our action-research all around the world, with many different organizations, we are co-creating knowledge with powerful knock-on effects. For example, yesterday I was in Rabat demonstrating the functioning of a Futures Literacy Lab at ISESCO. Now they are keen to collaborate with UNESCO to launch a whole series of Future literacy labs over the next year throughout the Islamic world.

To address your question about development directly, let me underscore that UNESCO’s work in the field is creating tangible opportunities to experiment with innovative approaches to implementing the “Senian” idea of capability as the key to development. Cultivating Futures Literacy takes on this challenge directly by enabling communities to diversify why and how they imagine their own futures. For example, last year, at a Futures Literacy Lab in Rwanda with 120 university students, it became evident during Phase 1 of the Lab, that the initial image of the future – the one that was easiest for participants to describe when they were asked to imagine Rwanda in 2040 – was that of “Wakanda”, a fictional country created by Marvel Comics and home to the superhero Black Panther. This powerful image of the future was created by Hollywood, it is a techno-modern utopia, ‘politically correct’ from a mass-market cinema perspective, with fantastic fashions, really exciting. Yet when I asked the students at the end of Phase 1 of the Lab how they felt about the image they had come up with they told me that they felt a sense of despair. Since they did not see how they could ever make Wakanda happen. This image of the future not only locked them into a version of agency that looked like a recipe for failure – the feeling of being inadequate to climb the mountain of this techno-topia. But it was also quite clearly someone else’s idea of the future, not home grown.

The question becomes how to collaborate with people in ways that co-create situations for cultivating their imagination? How to get beyond the images that arise from someone else's frames as well as the images that arise from the expectation that we should be able to impose today's ideas on tomorrow: colonized images for colonizing tomorrow. What approaches might create the conditions in which people feel invited and able to uncover their own narrative traditions, their own history of imagining the future? What are the design principles for processes that foster an awareness of the different underlying story telling conventions, the structure of the stories from mythology and culture? What kinds of learning processes, such as collective intelligence knowledge creation tools, facilitate the negotiation of shared meanings around the origins of the images of the future that people use? How to make sense of the power of these images? And what about the ability to connect imagined futures to actual situations?

Of course, it is perfectly natural to imagine the future in terms of imitation, catch-up and converge. But at a certain point you come to the realization that to become yourself it is not enough to imitate big brother or big sister, to converge and catch-up to the adults. At some point you need to think of who you are in your own context. This means being able to not only imagine different futures but also see that experimentation, experience, and uncertainty are rich but unplanned sources of becoming and being. It also helps to realise that the futures we imagine shape our expectations and that our expectations determine what we fear and hope for. Lacking an understanding of why and how we imagine the future it is not surprising that it is often difficult to find meaning in life. As Karl Popper put it, this is "poverty of imagination" and it is a condition that is closely associated with conflict, war, despair and anger. Hence, you can see why Futures Literacy is a central issue for UNESCO.

Through this field work, the Futures Literacy concept is therefore empowering people, particularly in the developing world, to anchor development in their own history, their own context. On a more strategic level, how do you use future thinking and futures literacy in advising governments and designing policies?

If you accept that we live in a complex emergent universe, and that we can't predict the future, what do we do? How do we respond to the climate crisis, and species extinction, when we must act now? This is an issue which has to do with both humility and morality, and the agency related to it. I was always unhappy with the idea of structuring human agency with the justification that the ends justify the means. "We know best and will tell you what to do, we will save you and the planet". What is the alternative? In my view, a response to these questions has at least two components. One is to live my values now. To not justify my current acts in the name of the future, but by finding opportunities to express those values in the present. From this point of view my legacy is not some brilliant plan for the preservation of species, which may or may not make sense 20, 50 or 100 years from now. My legacy is how I have acted to change my relationship to the world in the present. Attempting to impose the future as I see it now on the next generation is a colonial position. The second and related component, one that depends on being more futures literate, involves enhancing our capacity to detect and invent opportunities in the present. For example, if I want to express my desire to reduce current rates of species extinction then I must be able to see the potential of the present in a different way. To not be locked into futures that depend on the continuity of the intrinsic alienation and exploitation that are built into current systems and practices.

Learning to walk on the two legs of Futures Literacy taps into some very basic aspects of awareness or perception of both the world and our role in it. Right now, the dominant mind-set takes a rather strange approach to time – it imagines immortality and eternity, sort of as if time stopped. Think of Peter Pan and Frankenstein, eternal youth, eternal life. This point-of-view, this way of denying time, does not respect the end of things. We avoid imagining futures in which people die and organizations like Nation states, corporations or cities decline, become diminished, even vanish. When things end, die or fade away, rather than it being seen as a defeat, a terrible catastrophe, an indication of failure, what if we could understand that it is actually a gift: the creation of compost for the next generation. Reality is circular, evolutionary. If we can't integrate the end of things into our thinking, we are basically at odds with the way the universe functions.

Of course we still make bets all the time. Nobody says to eliminate bets and the entire structure of thinking that goes around betting. But why bias our betting towards immortality and control of the future? Such bets are heavy with defensiveness and obsessed by the need for certainty. So we build pyramids, fortresses and impose repetition of past versions of success on future generations. Why constrain our ability to perceive the world by fearing change, over-investment in path dependency, and resistance to things ending? Our world is incredibly creative. Constant experimentation, purposeful and combinatorial, generates novelty, emergent phenomena, often with no name, unknowable in advance. What did the word 'google' mean 20 years ago? We make it so much harder to perceive novelty if our imagination is constrained to extrapolating the past into the future, with a focus on preserving the past and imposing our will on the future through managerial expertise and technocratic knowledge. This is a key aspect of 'poverty of the imagination' it weakens our ability to observe and appreciate the potential of what is going on around us.

In large part this effort to understand anticipation has to do with how we relate to transformation. UNESCO is an old-fashioned organization, rooted in a highly teleological perspective – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes full employment. The SDGs imagine the future in terms of industrial-era achievements and definitions of well-being. If I am consistent with my position about things ending and being renewed, ways of doing things do not need to last forever and our big challenge is to invent new ways of doing things and to be open to the opportunities, the strengths and weaknesses of the world around us. Thus, the idea of perpetual dominance stops making sense. Things go up, go down or decline because other things grow up. This is a birth and death perspective on transformation. It is about adaptation and genuine resilience that includes discontinuity. It is also about humility and generosity. Might our gift to future generations be a greater willingness to become compost, to be their fertilizer, to not live forever? This way of thinking about transformation and change depends on being able to alter the way we use the future – to become futures literate.

Open discussion (*in French and English alternatively*)

Lola Poggi-Goujon (Conseil International du Cinéma, de la Télévision et de la Communication Audiovisuelle, CICT) : Comment concilier la vision du futur qui par essence est individuelle et subjective avec la nécessité de l'inscrire dans un cadre ? Je me souviens encore de mes premières expériences sur le terrain, où je me retrouvais systématiquement entravée dans mon action dès lors qu'il s'agissait de projets financés par la Banque mondiale, laquelle dans ses ajustements structurels mettait justement en œuvre sa propre vision du futur. Et d'où provient le mot « literacy », comment ce néologisme a-t-il été élaboré? Comme l'écrit Umberto Eco dans *Le nom de la rose*, Stat rosa pristina nomine : « La rose d'antan subsiste par son nom » !

Riel Miller : Ces projets sont souvent fondés sur un modèle de rattrapage qui pour moi est non historique, car il repose sur une construction factice du passé. Tous les historiens vous diront que les changements d'époque ne sont pas compris par les contemporains. Notre façon, très impérialiste, d'assurer la reproduction du pouvoir en l'appuyant sur un récit fabriqué mais rassurant du passé, est à l'origine des entraves que vous évoquez. De fait, ce qu'on pourrait faire sur le terrain ce serait de cultiver les outils, les compétences et les réseaux qui peuvent à terme représenter une alternative, une autre vision. Nous travaillons actuellement en Afrique et ailleurs sur la manière de décoloniser la pensée et mesurons à quel point c'est difficile. Quant aux mots que nous employons, pour imaginer un avenir qui n'existe pas, il faut des mots, des concepts. Souvent dans les ateliers, j'observe que les gens retombent vite dans d'anciens paradigmes car notre langage est lié à notre identité et à notre envie de certitude. C'est un piège. Et le problème se pose dans toutes les langues comme je le constate avec la traduction de mon ouvrage, car comment transcrire exactement des mots, certes un peu inventés et déformés, mais qui sont des outils puissants pour traiter les questions qui nous interrogent ? Très souvent dans nos laboratoires, je comprends que nous sommes sur la bonne voie quand on me dit que les mots manquent pour exprimer la pensée.

Jean-Pierre Boyer (ancien Secrétaire général de la Commission nationale française pour l'UNESCO) : quel est selon vous la place de la prospective à l'intérieur de l'UNESCO ? A l'époque de la Commission internationale sur l'éducation pour le vingt et unième siècle, dite Commission Delors, nous travaillions sur un rapport qui se voulait prospectif. Plus tard, dans un

groupe de travail présidé par Michel Agnaïeff, alors Président de la Commission canadienne, nous avons beaucoup insisté sur la fonction prospective de l'UNESCO, qui devait être centrale. Nous estimions que chaque secteur devait être orienté vers une vision prospective, avec une coordination d'ensemble. Actuellement, la prospective semble concentrée au sein du Secteur des sciences sociales. Comment se fait la coordination et comment l'UNESCO peut-elle être prospective de manière convaincante dans tous ses domaines de compétence ?

Riel Miller : personne ici ne s'étonnera de l'opacité des décisions organisationnelles dans la maison. Quant à l'approche sectorielle, dès mon arrivée à l'UNESCO, lorsque la Directrice générale m'a demandé d'aider à changer la manière de penser le futur dans notre institution, on m'a conseillé d'aller voir les ADG. J'ai simplement proposé d'aider à intégrer le futur dans leurs programmes, d'en maîtriser les outils, mais vous ne serez pas surpris d'apprendre que je n'ai pas trouvé de répondeur, ni au Siège ni hors Siège. Depuis, je travaille exclusivement avec des partenaires et des financements extérieurs. Pourtant, pas plus tard que la semaine dernière, j'ai organisé pour un de nos collègues un laboratoire sur le Futur des conséquences de l'esclavage qui a été un succès. On est venu m'en remercier, alors que l'offre était disponible depuis plus de sept ans !

Il y a une tradition française de la prospective nourrie par les travaux de Gaston Berger, Michel Godet, Bertrand de Jouvenel, également liée à la réflexion philosophique de penseurs tels qu'Edgar Morin. La prospective menée dans le cadre de France Stratégie par exemple, mais aussi dans les entreprises et les ONG reste très voisine de la vision de l'OCDE en ce qu'elle s'intègre dans une démarche de planification. Pour Gaston Berger, regarder l'avenir devrait perturber notre idée du présent. En même temps, il comparait nos civilisations à une voiture qui roulait de plus en plus vite sur une route inconnue la nuit et dont les phares devaient porter de plus en plus loin. Ces deux propositions me paraissent contradictoires, mais la réalité nous contraint à les prendre toutes les deux en compte.

Demander à l'UNESCO, l'OCDE ou à des gouvernements d'utiliser l'approche prospective dominante pour prévoir et planifier n'est pas bienvenu en toutes circonstances. Il est heureux que tout le monde ne soit pas preneur d'une prospective exclusivement orientée sur la prévision et l'action, si appréhender l'avenir c'est agir pour coloniser demain, et si on investit dans des exercices de prévision majeurs mobilisant des experts en nombre pour produire des rapports qui restent sur les étagères. Cela n'est pas compatible avec l'adaptation d'une approche du type *littératie des Futurs*.

Marie-Claude Machon Honoré (Présidente du Comité de liaison ONG-UNESCO): décoloniser la pensée me paraît un concept intéressant, c'est en effet une question de mots. Il n'est que de penser à la novlangue dont Orwell avait fait, dans *1984*, un instrument de domination intellectuelle. Ne pourrait-on mener les observations nécessaires à la prospective à partir de situations concrètes, dans les régions, comme le font les ONG sur le terrain ?

Riel Miller un de nos défis majeurs est en effet l'authenticité. Les gens se rendent compte parfois, comme dans l'exemple de l'atelier au Rwanda, que leur pensée a été colonisée à leur insu. Or notre démarche consiste principalement à leur permettre de se faire leur propre idée du futur. Je propose toujours de commencer par un questionnement permettant de créer un contexte de créativité et d'ouverture. Au Sierra Leone, avec des jeunes, nous avons démarré un laboratoire par des chants, des danses, des libations aux ancêtres. Il n'y a pas de modèle unique, chaque contexte est différent. Je comprends qu'il puisse être gênant pour des collègues soucieux d'efficacité et désireux de tenir leurs objectifs budgétaires et de publication de s'engager dans un processus qui réclame en amont un énorme investissement de production de connaissance par la voie de l'intelligence collective. Mais un processus authentique ne saurait se réduire à des objectifs fixés à l'avance : c'est un cheminement, un apprentissage. Chacun doit tracer son propre parcours. Cela nous impose de travailler ensemble à élaborer des principes de design qui ne sont pas fondés sur l'ingénierie du passé.

Patrick Gallaud (Vice-président de l'AAFU) : Nous avons publié dans notre magazine *Lien* un dossier sur le changement climatique. Notre idée était d'adopter une vision de départ positive. Or il s'est révélé difficile d'obtenir des contributions positives des secteurs concernés, qui collaborent au sein de la plateforme intersectorielle sur le climat. Comment peut-on parler

d'avenir à des jeunes dans une situation aussi préoccupante ? Le GIEC qui se réunit dans quelques jours à l'UNESCO n'aura sans doute pas de bonnes nouvelles à donner.

Riel Miller : c'est un sujet sur lequel je travaille essentiellement avec des partenaires extérieurs. Ma réponse est que nous vivons dans une incertitude fondamentale et qu'il est important de considérer cela comme positif. Si nous voulons être immortels et perpétuer nos civilisations pour l'éternité, alors oui, les nouvelles sont préoccupantes. Mais si nous considérons, hors de toute idéologie, que notre planète nous envoie un message, qu'il y a peut-être un problème fondamental dans notre manière d'habiter le monde, et que nous devons repenser notre rapport à l'univers qui nous entoure, ainsi qu'à notre commencement et à notre fin, alors nous pouvons commencer à travailler sur les constructions mentales hiérarchiques, déterministes et réductionnistes qui nous aliènent, les remplacer par ce que nous savons de la complexité du monde, diversifier notre façon d'être. Dominer notre anxiété face à l'incertitude nous évite de nous retrancher dans une attitude défensive qui nous entraîne à ériger des murailles et des citadelles, à nous enfermer dans des pièges.

La littératie des futurs est une invitation à repenser comment vivre sur cette terre. Ce ne sera pas forcément mieux : apprendre à lire et écrire peut servir à déclarer la guerre comme à écrire des poèmes d'amour. Mais c'est une compétence qui peut nous aider à trouver du sens dans le monde autour de nous, dès maintenant, et cela profitera au futur.

Josiane Taillefer (Vice-Présidente de l'AAFU) : croyez-vous vraiment que l'on puisse penser l'avenir quand on n'est pas capable de tirer les leçons du passé ?

Riel Miller : La sagesse n'a plus beaucoup de valeur dans notre société, et nous avons du mal à intégrer les leçons du passé dans le présent. Il faut changer notre approche pour la rendre compatible avec la complexité, l'émergence, la nouveauté, la spécificité. Notre époque nous porte aux généralités, aux produits de masse : nous nous faisons une idée générale du succès, du statut, alors que notre vie est composée de moments spécifiques en temps et espace, uniques et éphémères. La quête permanente de réalisations durables et de masse nous prive fondamentalement de l'essentiel de notre expérience. Cela nous empêche d'apprécier le monde autour de nous et ses immenses richesses. Il est absurde de vouloir homogénéiser et réduire les différences, qui sont à l'origine de la créativité et de l'évolution. Dans la diversité, il y aura beaucoup d'échecs, des expériences qui ne serviront à rien, et c'est tant mieux, car il faut beaucoup d'exubérance, d'expériences, de gaspillage même pour faire la richesse de la vie.

Malcolm Hadley : Each of us have favorite authors who have written about the future : in the English language we have Karl Marx, Aldous Huxley, H.G. Wells, etc. Do you have a favorite author ? And why ?

Riel Miller : I certainly read Science fiction ! I was struck as an adolescent by a book by Robert Heinlein on the story of a man who woke up in a woman's body. Quite a reorientation of perspective ! There was also Greg Bear's novel Darwin's Radio which is on genetic adaptation : he imagines that the human species in order to survive has to significantly change the way it functions organically. All of a sudden children are born around the world that can learn in no time 20 to 30 languages, change color, communicate in better ways. As they are different, they end up being killed... I like books that tell us about using our imagination in ways which disorient and alter our perception of the world. And for me fundamentally that is what using the future is about. All future thinking is fiction. We are very accustomed to narrative structures with beginnings and ends, this limits our ability to imagine. So I am not endorsing literature in its current form, but there are some writers and artists that inspire us to break out of the mold.

PS – Covid-19 illustrates, as if we needed another demonstration, that we can prepare but not control. Effective improvisation and spontaneity depend on highly demanding preparation – but not a plan for every circumstance. Catastrophic events also bring to the forefront questions about the vulnerability (non-diversified) of existing systems and the opportunities that destruction (the end of certain things) creates. Might this be the moment to rethink the relationship between trust and physical interaction in order to take advantage of digital tools that allow us to organize work for life instead of life for work? (See: [“Trying to know what we do not know: the heterarchical murmuration learning intensive society”](#), Miller, 2016).