

# FUTURE SEARCH NETWORK'S FUTURESEARCHING

EXPLORING COMMON GROUND FOR COMMUNITY ACTION

## The Spirit of Our Work: A Mosaic of Ideas

Shem Cohen...and Members of Future Search Network

*A worn, flat, almost round stone  
Flung by the arm of the universe  
I skip across the rippling waters*

*Leaving in my wake  
A string of ever-expanding circles...*

"Skipping Stone," Tobin Quereau<sup>1</sup>

The room is filled with 65 people coming together, some hesitantly, to explore important, complex issues that affect all of their lives. The setting is any one of hundreds of FSCs from around the world where diverse groups of people come together to try and create solutions to significant dilemmas they are facing.

They may be looking to resolve the housing crisis in their community or revitalize their business, to create a new vision for their church or bring peace to their country. They've come together to try to make some sense of their situation and figure out how (and if it's even possible) to move forward in an aligned and concerted way.

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<sup>1</sup>Tobin Quereau, Listserve Post, February 2005

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Some are inspired by the promise this activity offers... some are curious about how this conference can help them (if not make things more difficult)...many wonder if their voices will be honored...some have deep concerns about bringing these groups of people together for any length of time.

And then, usually on day two, it happens. Sometime during and just after "Prouds and Sorries," a new "space" is created. The group has somehow altered its collective field to a place of learning, acceptance, and responsibility. Everyone can feel it. The messages are deeper, from the heart. The listening is more focused as people lean forward with attentive ears, eyes, and minds, honoring each story as a deep truth that gives clearer definition to who they are in the world. Though the issues are still complex and no solutions are on the table yet, a new way of being together has emerged. And from this new plateau of group energy and attention the seeds of inspiration and hope are sewn for co-creating the future they all desire.

*"The forces that create life and drive the universe are the same ones that propel every future search conference. Future search, therefore, works because it is congruent with fundamental natural law[s]. With all loving respect to tribal mythologies and traditions, which many of us have seen reflected in the patterns of a future search conference, it goes far deeper than that—into the very forces that gave rise to such stories and rituals, right down into the nature and spirit of the very earth itself."*<sup>2</sup> (Ralph Copleman)

What is it that happens in those moments of magic—when the group field becomes crisp and the air so clear you can almost see the room sparkle? What is it about our role as conference managers and how we manage the experience that

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makes it possible (and even probable) for rather large groups with such diversity of perspectives and stories to reach this new place together?

Explanations can be found in many relevant models from systems and organization theory, behavioral science, and complexity theory that offer us valid frameworks for understanding this magic. In this article, I would like to present a mosaic of ideas offered by various members of the Network to the Listserve and newsletter, and some of my own thoughts on our roles as conference managers.

When I hear colleagues talk about their work and the meaning it offers, the ideas resonate with a place deep within me—a place of core values and spirit—and I feel that the work we do has less to do with our jobs and more to do with how we've chosen to walk in the world.

*"Personally I am dedicated to figuring out ways to help non-profits*

*and communities acknowledge the complexities and their multiple realities, hopefully leading to new ways of thinking and acting to validate the humble steps we take."*<sup>3</sup> (Anne Gardon)

*"...I like to think of my own role as helping the client system to move around the Gestalt Cycle of Experience: develop a clear and common 'figure' (from the concept of figure/ground, or what is important to them), help them build energy around that figure, whether it is the positive valence of the future vision or the painful experience of the present, and then move to action...."*<sup>4</sup> (Helen Spector)

When describing how he understands his role, Mike Bell expressed a preference for the term "animator" instead of "facilitator": *"The word animator comes from the Latin word 'anima,' which means 'soul,' 'spirit,' or 'breath,' as in 'breath of life.' The group animator is the one who helps 'animate' the spirit or life-force of the group...he or she recognizes that an organization is part of a living universe with its own internal life-force or spirit....the animator reaches out to the group and uses 'probes' (questions, examples, simulations) to help the group find areas of blockage, make hidden assumptions visible, examine and assess working relationships, and become more conscious of its mission and responsibilities. In the future search methodology, group members share in this process and animate one another."*<sup>5</sup>

At its very core, our work as facilitators/animations and OD professionals is about managing streams of consciousness. In traditional OD work, we collect data, interpret the data into what we hope are useful and manageable categories, and feed this data back into the client system for people to interpret and act upon as best they see fit. To design and lead this process, we, the change professionals, have many useful models to

<sup>2</sup>Ralph Copleman, *FutureSearching*, Issue 15, Spring 1999, "Why Future Search Works"

<sup>3</sup>Anne Gardon, quoted in *Consulting Today* article, 2003, "Future Search in Non-Profits"

<sup>4</sup>Helen Spector, Listserve Post, February 2005

<sup>5</sup>Mike Bell, *FutureSearching*, Issue 29, August 2004, "Some Thoughts on Why Future Search Succeeds in Diverse Cultures"

help us and our clients understand, predict, control, and/or change their organizations, and apply these models to our filtering of data and to the shaping of our work. In certain circumstances, this approach works quite well. But I believe the reason this is so is not due largely to our knowledge and competent application of appropriate models (though this can be helpful), but to the orchestration of a process at some point through which clients create their own meaning and determine their own best course of action.

*"If we believe that every... organization—along with the communities we work in and our field of endeavor—really are systems, then we have to act on its most important precept: no one part is superior or inferior to any other part. That doesn't mean losing our credibility or sense of self, but developing the ability to see the connections we have to everything else, the dependence we have on each other and the 'both/and' nature of things."*<sup>6</sup> (Sandra Janoff)

As we've dramatically changed our world over the past 20 years, our understanding about systems has also evolved. Many began to see the overwhelming complexity of not only the natural world, but also the worlds we create for ourselves through our human systems, communities, and organizations.

In some important ways—and especially in work with whole systems—the traditional role of the consultant as the collector, consolidator (filter), and presenter of relevant data seemed to cross a line of value to that of a likely bottleneck shaped by the consultant's interpretations and preferred models. In the real world, things became too complex and began to change too fast for even the internal stakeholders of a given system to grasp, let alone a visitor from the outside. New

paradigms were needed to help people meaningfully explore the complexity of their systems and landscape and help build consensus on actions to best make progress.

*"The process and energy of a future search brings diverse elements of the 'system' into contact with one another... for interaction that sparks new connections, perspectives and possibilities that lead to growth...the focus remains on those who are there, not on the expertise and authority of those doing the intervention. Not only is the solution 'saturated,' but the values and process of a future search provide the catalyst for finding common ground and then focusing on the future. It is an experience of self/system-development where the individual—and the organization/community—can grow in awareness, empathy, intention, and action."*<sup>7</sup> (Tobin Quereau)

The new paradigm (though quite ancient) crystallized and came to us in our times via future search (and OST), approaches that honor the capabilities of people to take full responsibility for generating and interpreting their own relevant data, create meaning, and commit to action. For many of us, as change agents, our roles shifted. The less front and center we became, the more effective we became. The less technical expertise we brought to the table and the more we tended the process, the greater value our presence offered.

Personally, when I began to integrate FS principles into my OD work across a spectrum of clients,\* this integration seemed to bring a great deal more integrity to the work, create outcomes profoundly more successful and solutions

longer lasting. I also discovered that my work more closely reflected my own mission in life, and my role in client systems rested, now more than ever, in *core principles* working with groups, my clarity of intention and grounding in spirit.

As I hear from colleagues and believe myself, it is from a core place of our humanity that we're able to nurture social fields that help groups to safely differentiate, learn from each other, and discover common ground.

*"My belief is that change takes place in much the same way that crystals form in a saturated solution. At some point, as one adds a solid to a solution, it becomes super-saturated, and crystals begin*

*to form in isolated, almost random places. These crystals attract further crystal growth, and eventually entire architectures become apparent. Social change happens the same way, beginning with a 'bath' of change-makers who coalesce in isolated pockets that work through attraction and not by promotion. The job of those who would seek to foster such change is to tend to these nascent crystals (they are easily damaged), and to continue to saturate the solution."*<sup>8</sup> (Brad Rourke, quoted by Helen Spector)

In our generation, professional facilitators benefit from a wonderful culmination of extensive behavioral science research that makes it possible for us to step into just about any group situation under the sun and help to effect deeper understanding, and to leverage positive change. We understand group stages of development and can apply appropriate intervention strategies from a number of valid lenses. We can recognize issues of authority as they play out in groups...teach and practice techniques of effective feedback...resolve conflicts through

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<sup>6</sup>Sandra Janoff, *FutureSearching*, Issue 30, Winter 2004, "Defending Defensiveness"

<sup>7</sup>Tobin Quereau, Listserve Post, February 2005

<sup>8</sup>Helen Spector quoting Brad Rourke, Listserve Post, February 2005

\*corporations, banks, nonprofits, government, manufacturing, small business, education

time-tested, proven models ...and administer psychometric tools to help deepen our clients' understanding of their complex styles and preferences and help them improve their relationships and performance.

While all of this knowledge is useful (and even a requisite) for certain work, I find it interesting that one can step into what is arguably one of the most complex facilitation environments (such as a future search offers) with what can be considered a minimal amount of training, and successfully/repeatedly provide large, complex groups powerful experiences that help them make significant progress and touch people in very meaningful ways.

Through grounding our work in FS values and principles, we're able to guide our attention and intention with a deep resolve to act from the best of ourselves. We're able to connect and move from that place in us that accepts and honors self and others, appreciates the blessings and joy of every moment, and receives delight in the exhilaration of helping others learn, grow, and create community.

*"Making the circle bigger means including whoever wants to be included, with whatever baggage they bring. It means starting by accepting ourselves just the way we are. That's the way to make the circle bigger. You make the circle bigger when you create ways for people to experience themselves in relation to the whole. You make the circle bigger when you set up processes that enable a free flow of information in all directions. You make the circle bigger*

*when you add more chairs and invite outsiders to sit in. You make the circle bigger when you invite people to accept each other and listen rather than insist that others have to change first. You make the circle bigger when you provide*

*ways that more people can share responsibility for what happens now and what happens next."*<sup>9</sup>  
(Marvin Weisbord)

The light of our humanness, our sacred selves filled with grace and humility, invites others to share our world, differences and all, and creates conditions for peace.

learning...to listen and engage in ways that honor every voice...to stay centered amidst a storm, confusion or the difficulties of a given moment...to step in with clarity and offer choices that help others clear a path forward...and to hold the space for others to safely explore and accept their differences and discover their common dreams.

*People are energized by interactions:*

- *In which a compelling vision is created*
- *In which they can contribute meaningfully*
- *When participants are fully engaged in interactions*
- *Marked by progress*
- *When hope becomes part of the equation*<sup>10</sup> (Dick Axelrod, quoting excerpt from MIT Sloan Management Review)

*"Each time we do principles over techniques, whatever the time frame, we make the world a little better than it was the day before."*<sup>11</sup>  
(Marvin Weisbord) **FS**

<sup>9</sup> Marvin Weisbord, *SearchNews*, Fall 1996, number 8, "SearchNet as a Global Change Strategy"

<sup>10</sup> Dick Axelrod, quoting from MIT Sloan Management Review, Summer 2003, Vol 44, #4, "What Creates Energy in Organizations?"

<sup>11</sup> Marvin Weisbord, Listserv Post, December 2003