

FUTURE *takes*

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World Future 2006 – July 28-30, Toronto

by Jay Herson

This year's annual meeting included a celebration of the 40th anniversary of the World Future Society. The conference theme "Creating Global Strategies for Humanity's Future" attracted 1050 registrants from 34 countries. The largest country contingent outside of North America was South Korea. There were 111 separate sessions divided among nine issue areas as well as 11 pre-conference courses. All sessions / courses were well attended and there was much informal small-group discussion between attendees outside of the meetings.

As usual the plenary sessions were very stimulating. There were three speakers at the opening session.

David M. Walker, comptroller general U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and author of *Retirement Security: Understanding and Planning Your Financial Future*, spoke on the topic of "Global Challenges in the 21st Century." Although Theodore Roosevelt said "we must exercise foresight and not be consumed with the here and now," the United States has never had a strategic plan. Over the past several decades the US has enjoyed economic growth, low inflation and interest rates while maintaining superpower status. This gives the impression of good times. Yet there are new challenges such as the threat of global pandemic influenza, disaster preparedness, fiscal imbalance, energy, health care, environment, and tax reform / entitlements. Many programs that are called upon to deal with these problems are inadequate and have outlived their usefulness. Australia and New Zealand are doing long range planning 40-50 years out. These countries are looking at the implications of an aging society and dealing with entitlement programs both public and private. The sophisticated methods being used are scenario creation, trend monitoring and fiscal projections. Said Walker, the US needs grounded foresight and a strategic plan in order to set priorities and manage change. Also, many of our problems require global action, and the US must take the lead to create global indices needed for solutions to the common problems such as aging populations, entitlements, fiscal crisis and environmental concerns as well as those based on interdependence—e.g. health and commerce. For further information he urged attendees to visit www.gao.gov and read the report on 21st Century Challenges.

Joel Garreau, reporter and editor, *The Washington Post* and author of *Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing our Minds and Bodies: What it Means to be Human* said that we are at an inflection point in history in the interpretation of what it means to be human. Technology is now aimed inward affecting mind and body and offspring. The first human to live to age 150 is probably alive today. Children in school are competing with classmates who have body and mind enhancements. Memory pills

are being developed for treating dementia and Alzheimer's disease but can be used by the wealthy to buy their children 20 additional points on the SAT. By the 2012 Olympics we should see the first gene-altered athlete. Recent research in the emerging science of telekinetics has developed methods to train a monkey to move objects with his mind. This has important implications for dealing with cerebral palsy victims and paraplegics. In development are artificial eyes and language translation implants, but in this man machine interaction where does man end and machine begin? There are three scenarios—Heaven—our inventions conquer pain, suffering, stupidity, ignorance and even death; Hell—creations wipe out the human race or all of life on earth within a generation and Prevail—the first two scenarios are technodeterministic, i.e. they will both occur.

Lance Secretan, founder, The Secretan Center, Erin, Ontario, Canada and author of *One: The Art and Practice of Conscious Leadership*. Six thousand years ago, human civilization was a single homogeneous entity—we shared the same stories and myths, mysteries and magic. It was the classical Greek philosophers who began the process of separate thinking by introducing rational thought. Renaissance thinkers picked up the pace and modern-day scientists and technocrats have further unraveled the global cohesion that once existed. Conscious leadership brings people, countries, corporations and communities together. The qualities needed for leadership are summarized as: courage, authenticity, service, truthfulness, love and effectiveness.

The closing session featured **Ray Kurzweil**, award-winning inventor and high-tech entrepreneur whose latest book is *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. He opened by giving many examples that the rate of technological change is doubling every decade. In the 21st Century we will see 20,000 years of progress at today's rate of advancement. Before the year 2030 there will be computers that think, reason and act at the same level as humans. The computer will cease to exist as a separate object. It will be part of us—controlling our vision and reality. Teleportation and virtual reality will allow for new experiences with all senses present. It is important to realize that all science is information science. We all carry about 30,000 software programs around with us every day. These programs are also known as genes. We are on the verge of developing artificial red blood cells, neural implants as a treatment for Parkinson's disease, and reverse engineering the brain as a treatment for Alzheimer's disease. Humans will some day be able to download their brains and this download can be uploaded in a newborn after they die. Kurzweil demonstrated a digital camera that could take a photo of a printed page and then read the page in synthetic voice that sounded human as well as a telephone that directly translates languages. Kurzweil did not speak of any ethical issues or problems created by these advances.

Jay Herson is Managing Editor and a frequent contributor to FUTUREtakes.