

Sunday August 16, 2026

The Future is Plural

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

Reflection on the Theme by Kelly Kanyid

In my ideal future, we all get to have Banana Laffy Taffy for breakfast on Sundays if we want. I try to make this a reality most Sundays by bringing a Banana Laffy Taffy to church for myself and my daughter, Mathilda. The practice has expanded to include enough Laffy Taffy to share with some of her friends. The only requirement is that they must have a love for artificial banana flavor (trust me, it's the best) AND grown ups in charge who allow early morning consumption of high fructose corn syrup. I feel like the gift of banana Laffy Taffy, the slightly subversive chemical composition representing both some of the best and the worst things humans do with a strong command of chemistry, is most holy when consumed in a room full of people who love you, who have all agreed to be here too early in the morning, and who are slightly worried about what you might do with that banana Laffy Taffy.

It is my wish that someday, in the very, very distant future, when I am gone and they are old, they will remember their Sundays at church as sweet, tangy, and hopelessly banana-licious. I hope that when they see something as outrageously yellow that they will remember this community, and our love for them, and not the potentially poor decision making that led their grown ups to agree to candy for breakfast. This is the future that lives in the best parts of my imagination.

The hopeful futures I imagine are all ones that see my daughter and her friends living beautiful lives without the kind of ugly events my generation and the ones before it had to survive.

My generation came to adulthood at 9/11, graduated from college during a financial crisis, parented through a pandemic, and now pay taxes to a government that converts our work ethic into bombs dropped abroad. Like every generation before us, we feel that we live in interesting times.

When I try to imagine what may come, I have to admit it seems statistically unlikely that there won't be more ugly events on the horizon. I hope I am wrong. My daughter and her friends are the embodiment of all that hope. They are proof that hope alone can make the world a better place, because it is a better place with them in it. We all know that the future is uncertain, it has always contained ugly things, and yet we all have hope enough to bring forth, influence, and love these perfect little people into a future. I don't know if we can build an ideal future worthy of them. But I do know that we can make it better than the present with our drive to transform, and our ability to rebuild a world more closely resembling the image of our highest ideals. Historically the world does trend toward a brighter future. After all, the recent past was a world without some of the best things that we enjoy in the present: at times without germ theory, or universal suffrage, without the Polio vaccine, and without kids at church on Sunday eating Banana Laffy Taffy. Whatever the future holds for them, the children in our community may not be able to count on us to make healthy breakfast choices for them, but they can count on our love, which is something they will get to take with them long after we are gone. May that love help shape a future worthy of them.

The Future is Plural: The Work of Futuring in Complicated Times by Dr. Laura Nissen

Good morning.

I have a proposition for you that relates to the way you think about the future. Do you think the future is going to be better or worse? Additionally, do you believe you have any impact on the future - your sense of agency - can you make things better with your precious life energy? What is the "cost" of getting too comfortable in your current way of thinking about the future...and what might it take to expand your ideas about what is and isn't possible? These are questions that futurists work with every day...and this morning I'm going to take you on a bit of a tour of what "futurists" do and how it connects to the work and life of this collective. The future and future talk, belongs in spaces of the spirit. Let's go.

I want to assert that futurists don't predict the future. We rigorously and intentionally expand peoples' senses of what is possible. Cultivation of this imagination paired with agency, is, futurists might say, is the most important resource needed not only to survive what is here and what is coming, but to thrive. The history of all social change is the story of underdog ideas of hope that persisted against the odds - these are iconic and archetypal dynamics at work. So the work to repair, re-invest in, remind you of, and rekindle individual and collective imagination is the most important work that futurists do. As such I'm going to tell you about what the field of futurism is about and hopefully, rekindle some optimism and agency within you individually and together - because this energy (often battered and beleaguered), this sense of potential and dare I say hope, is the most important resource that we have at our disposal right now. We cannot, as they say, allow the (explicatives) to steal our joy or sense of a better world fueled by love of planet and humanity.

I am a futurist or a term I prefer, a foresight practitioner. I'm also a social worker and an academic - which is where I professionally landed for more than 30 years. I began my journey in high school where a visionary global studies teacher had us read "future shock" (in its heyday) as a textbook. It captured my imagination in many ways - and I've never stopped watching for, learning about and trying to understand what is coming for this world we share, and what the implications might be. Interesting note: All of politics, interestingly, is an intellectual, economic, sociological, and psychological battle of ideas about the future. I might suggest, we can strengthen our game by paying attention to this. (True story - I was hired by the Oregon Democratic Party to facilitate a futures retreat for them a couple of years ago. It was fascinating and generative.)

As a social worker foresight practitioner, I focus on 5 things (and I wrote a book about them in recent years called "Anticipatory Social Work."). I'm especially interested in the future(s) of social issues, social change, social welfare, racism and all isms, and the futures of professions. And let me tell you (I probably don't need to) - it's a wild time out there.

One of the first laws of the future is that despite the common way we use the term, there actually is no one “future.” There are no future facts. Everything is dynamic. There are only assumptions with greater and lesser degrees of certainty about their stability. Even the concept of “stability” is a little up for grabs right now. Foresighters reliably introduce the concept of “future(s)” plural. The future, we famously say, is plural. Uncovering and challenging our assumptions is not a passive activity - it requires rigor and commitment. We use games and puzzles and other playful structures to help people stretch their capacity for this.

For example, in a famous exercise developed by Richard Dator and colleagues, folks are urged to consider 4 specific futures about any given topic. Future 1: Growth - everything moves along progressively in exactly the direction it is now, Future 2: Constraint - humans decide that the growth scenario isn't healthy, just and/or what we want, so we create barriers and guidelines and structures to curtail movement in any particular direction - we don't stop growth, but we more mindfully “conserve” our resources of all kinds, Future 3: Collapse - everything begins to fall apart in ways we can and can't imagine and/or control, and finally 4: Transformation - something happens that changes the course of civilization in a positive way and a “new age” is born. By constructing scenarios about issues we care about (imagine: The future of the UU church) we can better build the muscles we need to imagine pathways, intersections, possibilities. We can literally feel our assumptions getting challenged and uprooted. And while we choose a future we want and work towards it, we understand that all the other futures will likely be challenging, interacting with and reshaping it every step of the way. I had the privilege of doing this exercise at the onset of a 20-year project I was involved in - and then reconnecting with these original scenarios throughout. What I learned about this is not the value or gamesmanship of “getting the scenarios right” but rather the agency, stability, lack of reactivity that is produced when people develop fluency in options, possibilities and more. In fact, while no “one scenario” came true (which is not the appropriate marker for our work), rather after 20 years it became obvious that some part of all four came true and they intersected and mutated in unexpected ways. Despite this, we were, as a collective of about 200

people, less reactive, more focused, and more prepared because we'd already "pre-experienced" at least some of these futures and didn't need to spend a lot of time with our heads on fire adjusting to unexpected dynamics.

Now I want to reassure you, it isn't lost on futurists that the world is really challenging right now. We even have terms for it - one of my favorites of which is VUCA. This is a term originally developed in the 60's and had its impetus in the military - exactly like the internet. But its reach is now vastly beyond that. The letters stand for v - volatile (everything is a bit unpredictable - rapid, unstable, changing), u - stands for uncertainty (inability to predict outcomes due to missing or unclear data), c - complexity (an intricate pattern of factors and forces) and a - ambiguity (lack of clear baselines or mixed signals related to cause and effect). For some, learning about VUCA produces anxiety but I found it strongly calming (as do most folks) because it was comforting to realize that there was a NAME for the particular reality of intensifying uncertainty and instability we are all feeling. Futurists help people learn to surf this increasingly intensifying reality. Bob Johanssen - a futures writer/thinker - suggests in fact that the most important skills any of us can possess right now and in the years to come is to learn to transform or catalyze these phenomena in specific future facing ways. That means transforming volatility into vision, uncertainty into understanding, complexity into clarity, and ambiguity into agility.

The world of futures is political unto itself - every major corporation has a team of people who work on the future. Militaries do as well (and if you want a sobering experience...look into what military futurists are doing/thinking/planning). There are over 50 governments globally who have futures divisions (my favorite of which is Wales that actually passed a "future generations act" about 10 years ago decreeing that all major legislation must consider its impact on generations to come.). Of course Indigenous peoples have long considered this as a marker of good decision making - my current passion is their explicit commitment to intergenerational justice. The United Nations has an extensive futures division which I've had the privilege of working with. Increasingly, young futurists are asserting ideas about this world that challenge all

previous templates and that is a good thing. Variations of methods and lenses - Afrofuturism, Queer Futurisms, Feminist and Crip Futurisms, and many more are building out worldviews and futures that reinforce an intentional expansion of what we think of as “normal” or “possible.” All of us constructing possibilities, imagining. But a bigger project - and one that I’ve been working on - is building out methods of truly democratizing the future. Assuring that everyone has a voice in what happens next - and as we know - this is particularly precarious right now. Fewer and fewer people are getting more and more say about the future they want - but that is not the future I (and I know you) want.

For our community, I want to end by suggesting that as important as all of the thinking and imagining that we do collectively about the future “out there,” I’ve also been deeply shaped by a futurist named Jose Ramos who talks about the “inner work” of preparing for uncertain times. Preparing our hearts and minds for not only hard things, but unexpectedly beautiful, positive and transformational opportunities is important. Thinking about all of this can be challenging (which is why a lot of people don’t think about it, or buy into easy populist “solutions”). There’s even a science fiction book called “Normal” that was written about this journey - in which beleaguered futurists could admit themselves to a treatment program for the malady called “Abyss Gaze,” (hat tip to Nietzsche). The inner work implores us not to get lost in navel gazing, but to carefully, tenderly and rigorously acknowledge and prepare for shifts seen and unseen and work on our capacity to weather them for the sake of our shared well-being. This means imagining how to be prepared for things you can’t always see coming and cultivating the grace to bend through possible shifts, not break.

This is where my personal connection to our little church community rings most true. I believe we all need to be doing more to prepare ourselves and our circles for what’s coming because it may be very challenging and intense. Preparing ourselves to grow and adapt, preparing ourselves to reconsider what is important, what can be saved and what can be left behind, preparing ourselves for how to protect the most vulnerable among us in new ways we might not have considered in the past, preparing ourselves

to assert agency and our values in new ways and to invest in our joy and community like the sacred and powerful resource that it is. This very community, this sense of mutuality and love, is I believe among the most important defenses, fuels, resources that we have to “make it to the other side” of the challenging times we live in and to not only imagine social transformation but to co-create it. We know we are outnumbered in some ways, but we are undaunted because of the power of love and possibility. We are stubbornly committed to goodness, beauty, and justice. We practice transforming the world even when we cannot directly see its impact.

So as I end my remarks this morning, I bring you big questions once again, and I ask you, can we afford to leave ourselves in ideas of the future that relate only to despair? What can we do today to invest in and protect our imaginations, to not collapse into someone else’s limited ideas of what may happen in this world around us? What can we do to prepare ourselves and our communities for not only increasing turbulence and unpredictability (these are VUCA times) but also the presence of possible “turning points” that may just be harbingers of a future world of opportunity, healing, re-generation?

The future is plural. Don’t let ANYONE tell you otherwise.

Loving each other and the world around us has always been and will always be always be the most powerful force in the universe - the futures I want center on this principle.

On a personal note, thank you for helping me build a future of love when I needed it most. As I wrap up this chat with you today, I wanted to say goodbye as well. After almost 30 years in the Pdx/Vancouver region, I’ve realized I needed a change so will be moving up to the Puget Sound in just a few weeks where I’ll be connecting with a UU community up there...so today is my final gathering time with you all (unless you invite me back sometime!). My appreciation to you knows no bounds. I believe in you and in this loving work we do together. Thank you from every corner of my band aid covered heart.

