



Shaping the future: Fear, Ageing, Technology, and Hope

There and Then

In summer 2023 I was at a conference with other gestalt therapists. The topic of AI, its impact on the world, and all of us, and how we might move toward and with it as a community came up. The discussion included the relationship that ageing and getting older has to our attitude on AI. In my opinion, AI is a proxy for Change and in some ways for the shape of the future. There were a lot of emotions in the room, including my own. I felt my anger rise: these 'kids' who were being talked about as adversely impacted by 'how the world is and the inevitable change in the world' are not another species, they are my kids, aged 13 and 14. Amazing young people who will have to find their path through an uncertain future. I was surprised by some of the strong reactions and responses in the room.

My curiosity on the topic was piqued, so when The Forum asked what my perspective was on how we might shape the future, and not 'be shaped' by it came up, it seemed the same hopes and fears were in play.

I want to pose these difficult questions to you and invite you to stop a moment and feel/consider your responses. The past has shaped where we are now, the future is coming, whether we like it or not (as a good friend said to me once "time will pass, and things will happen" thanks Matt Spencer) but the anticipation (fear and hope) of the future, and the legacy of the past lives in only one place - right here, right now. There is a paradox, if you hold too tight, become too certain, then the future will be fixed, pre-figured, too determined, with no room for creativity and freshness, and if you do nothing you will be shaped.

Recognising Fear

Bias, and Resistance is a necessary part of the process.

I'm beginning with an honest look at some difficult topics.

As humans we all know fear, and a healthy amount of 'fear' keeps us safe, and indeed alive. Fear of the unknown, and of potential danger keeps us alert, alive and fresh. We need this. Fear can also freeze us, keep us doing comfortable, safe things and avoiding the new. In a work context, there is often a cultural 'norm' of embracing change, and change spoken of as always, a good thing. In my experience, expressions of fear tend to be expressed or experienced indirectly rather than stated explicitly because to do so might mean standing out or being different.

How might you recognise your fear, and how it might be informing your actions?

The first thing I want to say about bias is that it is inevitable, and instead of pretending otherwise, I am suggesting that we accept we all have them, because each of us is unique in our existence and experience and therefore see and experience the world differently. I am a 52-year-old, white woman. My bias-preference-

experiential norm, of technology, is different to my 14-year-old son. But it is important for me to remain open to the fact that my thoughts, feelings, and opinions about Snapchat, also include my biases,

How open are you to accepting your bias, and how curious can you be to another's world view?

Fear and bias are real and inevitable. And they will create the resistance that I think is vital to shaping the future. This might sound like a paradox. Shaping is a verb, something we do. It is an active process which includes giving fears and biases air and room to breathe. Sometimes things might feel too modern, trendy, or unfathomable. But where does that leave us? Do we ignore the invitation and challenge of a new world that bewilders us and that we could risk feeling shame by making mistakes and seem foolish in? Or do we build the conditions to embrace this? What support might be needed in an ever-changing world?

I believe this is the business of shaping the future.

However, it is also the business of creating an environment where healthy tension and trust can exist at the same time. There will be conflict. But without all the differing views, I suggest it is impossible to 'shape the future.' In this complex dialogue is where we learn, where we understand what must not be lost from the past, and what might we embraced from the future.

Age

A matter of perspective and a workplace 'hot topic'. This was part of the discussion on 'the future' at the conference I attended, where most people were, let's say, older than 30. In the workplace the age demographic is usually more diverse... across the whole organisation. However, we tend to get promoted



with the passing of time, and more experience. In my experience many 'Manager' groups are not 23, and so often the decision-making power sits with an older generation.

I am highlighting this here because change, the future, progress happens over time, and in our cultural norms, age and ageing stereotypes are common. I recently worked with someone who recruits and promotes career change for women over 50, and she highlighted to me the diversity, difference, and energy of this population. While at the same time, I am protective and defensive of my teenage children, and that they are not stereotyped in how they view and use technology.

I am 52, and as I age, I am increasingly aware of the ageing process and the inevitable marching of time. I can feel invisible, obsolete, and sometimes left behind. I feel 'othered.' I worry that I will get left behind with technology as I age too, and I don't want to become one of 'those' middle aged women (my biases!). I don't always understand, and I feel I should work this out, but I avoid it, find shortcuts, and get by rather than face into this. I don't like the idea that this is who I now am, so I ignore it and get more left behind. This could make me fearful, and defensive as I've already said, and yet I still feel about 23 in my head, passionate and ambitious.

This is a workplace hot topic, and that if we include, rather than 'other' or stereotype, could be a shaping the future superpower.

Technology

An enabler, and an inevitability in the world.

I'd like to invite you, as you read to stop for a moment. Take a breath in and let a breath out and consider philosophically for a moment the reciprocal nature of breath. You are taking oxygen in and letting carbon dioxide out. A necessary reciprocity.

In the context of shaping the future, or being shaped by the future, I want to offer the concept of this mutual exchange, of both happening at the same time. A nuanced balance of shaping and being shaped. Technology, AI, the future of work is all happening in the world, is already 'in the air,' and we are shaped by that. How each of us responds reciprocally changes the world. And this gives me hope. The advancement of technology is not all bad, there are enormous possibilities on a very human scale, e.g. my friend who was diagnosed dyslexic as an adult finds Chat GPT invaluable to help him access information and complete tasks that those of us who find reading in the normal way take for granted, or to record audio rather than send emails.

And I understand, and sometimes experience the feeling of bewilderment and danger and being left behind. My children feel this in a unique way, because they are growing into a world where these technologies are already in the air they breathe.



Therefore, I invite you to stop and consider. What are my feelings toward an uncertain future? How does technology enable me? How might I want to resist, and change the direction? In the reciprocity of us and our environment is where the change exists.

Hope

So how might we walk in this landscape and Shape our Future? What must fade away to allow new to emerge? It is midwinter as I am writing this, and winter is a going to ground, a withdrawal in order that the light and warmth may re-appear.

How might you remain curious and open, to the future, whilst at the same time honest and real with yourself and what feels right for you? How are you, or might you be, avoiding or ignoring what is inevitable?

I have hope, and I trust in the energy, and in the rage within each of us to do what fits best for us, if we are able to listen to ourselves and each other. I have hope that we can create something new, by creating the necessary tension, and conflict in the open and honest dialogue that can exist only between two people, not in one person or the other.

I'm hopeful that our young people, my children, who show me that our next generation are compassionate, empathic, and caring. I believe hope exists in not going gently into that good night, but facing the future with curiosity and vigour, knowing only that the future is by its very nature uncertain. We cannot hold on too tightly, because in doing so, we make it even more so.

“Do not go gentle into that good night, Old age should burn and rave at close of day. Rage, rage against the dying of the light”

Dylan Thomas



Here and Now

And so, I invite you, in the moment you have now, having read some of these thoughts and questions, to reflect on your relationship with the future, and the past. How do you wish to shape, and what room are you leaving to be shaped?

In whatever way feels right for you, note down your feelings, responses, reactions to what I've said. You might want to voice record, and like my chum, technology is your friend. You might prefer coloured pens and plain paper. Whatever medium you choose, note that as well. Because your current world view, including what came before and what you hope for the future is here. And it is your thoughts, feelings responses, actions, preferences, hidden biases that will, whether you like it or not, already be shaping what the future holds.



Dawn Wray is a coach & psychotherapist, with 30+ years' experience as a senior operations leader and has co-founded The Listening Collective.