

# REALISTIC HOPE

## FACING GLOBAL CHALLENGES

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Edited by Angela Wilkinson and Betty Sue Flowers

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*Angela Wilkinson and Betty Sue Flowers*

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*To our children, for their future*

*Ruairi McNicholas  
Emer McNicholas  
John Michael Flowers*

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# Foreword: Realising Hope

*Ged R. Davis*

## Thinking about realistic hope

Hope and fear are universal in human nature, embedded as they are in the structure of the brain. Fear is situated in the ancient amygdala, the source of the ‘flight or fight’ response, and hope in the more recently evolved frontal cortex. This capacity to envision the future also relies partly on the hippocampus, a brain structure that is crucial to memory.<sup>1</sup> Recent studies indicate that directing our thoughts of the future towards the positive – hope – is a result of our frontal cortex communicating with sub-cortical regions deep in our brain.<sup>2</sup> The human tendency to hope is a consequence of this evolution of our brains.

But hope and fear are not just about the functioning of the brain. Philosophers have for millennia been reflecting on hope.<sup>3</sup> The contemporary debate about hope takes as its starting point what has been called the ‘standard account’, which analyses hope in terms of a wish or desire for an outcome and a belief concerning the outcome’s possibility.<sup>4</sup>

Those things we hope for and those things we fear are very much shaped by the prevailing social context and dominant beliefs. For example, hope for a life after death was one of the major topics in medieval philosophy, as is still true for many today. The modern secular world view of hope conceives of the future as a space for potential fundamental change and, as such, hope is integral to the notion of social progress. But social progress can evoke new hopes and fears, whether as a result of new technologies – for example, the constructive solutions addressing pandemics or the destructive threat of

1 ‘Patients with damage to their hippocampus are unable to recollect the past, but they are also unable to construct detailed images of future scenarios. They appear to be stuck in time. The rest of us constantly move back and forth in time’ (Sharot, ‘The Optimism Bias’).

2 *Ibid.*

3 Bloeser and Stahl.

4 Section 3 on ‘The Standard Account and the Rationality of Hope’ in Bloeser and Stahl.



nuclear or biological weapons – or of impacts on the environment, besides many other possible changes.

Modern sociologists see hope as relational and social.<sup>5</sup> They recognise hope as a public good, highlighting the benefits of growing up in a society within which one can hope, rather than face despair. But hope is also a private good and part of life. One never knows what surprises may lie ahead, so one needs to be alert and hard-headed about how best to create a better future.

So how might we define ‘realistic hope’ for the pragmatic practitioner, such as the authors of this book, seeking to enable positive change that endures?

First, the outcome of the process must reflect the interests of all concerned and what we collectively believe to be good. Second, the process must examine the widest set of possibilities and consequences regarding the future and ensure that they are the product of analytically open and honest actions. And third, the process must be active in nature, inspirational, and capable of implementing actions that ‘make a difference’.

But the ability to make a difference depends on how the powerful use power to effect change, and whether they create a space where collective actions can be implemented. Much depends on whether our view of human nature is that of democratic ideals, as espoused by Rousseau, who believed that people are ‘naturally good’, or more like Hobbes, who believed in the authoritarian use of power because people are ‘naturally wicked’.

So there are boundaries to realistic hope. Some are shaped by our individual beliefs and others by our collective beliefs. These boundaries depend on how we answer questions such as, ‘Are people naturally good or wicked?’ ‘Is our stance in approaching challenges naturally passive or active?’ ‘Are we prone to unfounded utopian wishful thinking or lean towards evidence-based realism?’ ‘Do we understand what can and cannot be changed?’ or ‘Does this lead us to being open to new possibilities?’

### **Acting with realistic hope**

We are in the midst of a grand transition rife with extraordinary challenges of vast scale and with changes that needs to be managed over decades. Some of these challenges are covered in this book – international security, climate change, global poverty, water, digital technologies, and the future of work, to name a few. And many of these have been described as ‘wicked problems’.<sup>6</sup>

5 Miyazaki and Swedberg.

6 See, for example, Camillus; Rittel and Webber.

A wicked problem has innumerable causes, is tough to describe, and doesn't have a right answer. It is one in which a purely scientific or rational approach cannot be applied because of the lack of a clear problem definition and the differing perspectives of stakeholders. How are we to best address them? Too often most approaches seem ideological, rooted in the present, narrow in scope, limited in perspective, and lacking in imagination. Most current governments are proving to be incapable of addressing these challenges. We are facing problems without borders and governments without solutions!

But we can see the elements of a silent revolution underway that promises to offer us the realistic hope that apt solutions can be found. In many cases those involved in finding solutions are international entities, ad hoc groups, non-governmental organisations, cities and regions, enterprises, and, only occasionally, national governments.

Faced with a challenge of substance, how might we go about finding solutions that will last? What can we learn from the many approaches practitioners have developed in finding solutions? Below we highlight the five main steps, based on our experience, that we need to employ in any fully designed process for realising hope.<sup>7</sup>

These five steps are conception, framing, scenarios, vision and actions. Let us examine them in turn.

### 1 *Conception*

The starting point is to recognise a challenge or problem area, a purpose, and a time horizon for a future-oriented project. The agreement to proceed should carry with it a commitment to act, consequent on the process being completed. In many cases, the definition of a problem area is straightforward. For example, an energy company examines energy futures with the purpose of identifying new risks and opportunities and developing a strategy prior to new actions, or a government commits to a country review with the aim of identifying current challenges and new policies. But increasingly, global forces and a disruptive environment are leading us to address more complex problem areas. For example, today we cannot understand energy futures without understanding climate change and in some regions both food and water futures.

The start of a new project requires an initial framing of the problem, the identification of those stakeholders and experts who are to be involved, and a judgement about what budget is needed. Critical for any futures-oriented

<sup>7</sup> For those interested in a summary description of this process, see Davis *et al.*, and for a fuller description see Meredith *et al.*

project is the selection of participants that allows for the broadest set of perspectives feasible, the adoption of rules of engagement among participants that encourage dialogue as the main mode of communication, and a bias towards learning.

## 2 *Framing*

The starting point is a review of the interviews of participants in the project and the opinions of experts as a catalyst for conversations on the relevant framing of the problem area. Empathy and dialogue are critical to building collective ownership of the framing. The outcome of the framing leads to a focused research programme, which contributes to the subsequent work on futures development.

## 3 *Scenarios*

A small number of alternative futures, that is, scenarios, are developed to explore the key dimensions of the framing of the problem area. Narratives are developed for each scenario. Predictive analytics and systems modelling over the chosen time horizon reinforce the storylines. The scenarios provide a context for developing a strategy, policies, and a desired vision of the future.

## 4 *Vision*

Values are central to the creation of vision. In some cases they may be a reflection of goals stated elsewhere – for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals. The vision must be not just inspirational, but also realistic, set in the context of the scenarios. Clarifying a vision of the future – in effect, stating our ‘realistic hope’ – is the catalyst for identifying those actions needed to create change.

## 5 *Actions*

The participants who have developed the vision have a leading role in identifying the actions that will bring about change; but many others will be brought into the process of implementing and legitimising change. The actions are not just about new strategy and policies, but may involve a wider range, including new investments, institutional development, and a reconfiguration of assets and the skill base.

If all of these steps are covered correctly, such a process can deliver genuine solutions. But there are pitfalls to be avoided: limited stakeholder representation; lack of dialogue and the inability to build co-ownership of the problem's framing; weak scenario narratives not backed-up by adequate analysis; a

vision lacking clarity, detail, and inspiration; and a lack of courage in the implementation of needed change.

And for a wicked problem there is no solution that lasts forever. As our knowledge expands, as new stakeholders emerge, and as mind-sets change, the framing of the problems will also change, and relevant scenarios will need modification. At some point a re-examination of the problem will be needed, using the process above. This may include re-visioning and identifying new actions. Tough problems are, in effect, ‘infinite games’<sup>8</sup> and need to be re-addressed from time to time. You do not solve a problem like climate change or global poverty in a single attempt, but rather commit to address the problem again and again until it has been re-solved or dis-solved over time.

In summary, we have processes and tools tested for tackling wicked problems. They use our knowledge and ability to imagine the future, catalyse new actions to realise our deepest hopes, and help us create the world we want.

In this book are applied examples covering many of the toughest problems we face. I hope they will inspire you to action!

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### **About the Author**

**Ged R. Davis** is Executive Chair, Scenarios, World Energy Council, former Managing Director, World Economic Forum, former Head of Scenario Planning at Royal Dutch Shell, and co-author of *Catalytic Governance: Leading Change in the Information Age*.

# Introduction: Building Better Futures

*Angela Wilkinson and Betty Sue Flowers*

## Why we created this book

In the classical Greek myth, when Pandora opened the jar, releasing death and all the other challenges of human life, she closed it again as quickly as she could, trapping inside it one remaining human attribute – hope.

The world today is full of so many large, complex, socially messy, and interconnected challenges that solving them often seems hopeless. News reports are full of fear of the future – a return to nuclear war; the unravelling of Europe; a crisis within democracy; global warming; water wars; a ‘globesity’ pandemic in some parts of the world, and food and water shortages in others; the rise of robots and the demise of decently paid jobs.

Contemporary life is objectively risky and unpredictable – but life has always been risky and unpredictable. What’s new is the ‘deep problem’ of uncertainty. Uncertainty used to be thought of as a problem that could be solved with more data. But even with exponentially more data, we now have new issues of emergence, ambiguity, and interconnectedness so that we cannot easily reduce global challenges into quantifiable and manageable global risks.

But uncertainty can be a social resource – it can animate new ways of knowing and being, and it can be used to negotiate insecurity and to create new relationships. Uncertainty and hope are part of the evolutionary advantage of our entire species. Progress emerges not just from our ability to observe the world around us but from our capacity to organize imagination and create new and better future possibilities.

To face global challenges many of us – not just official leaders – must work together. Even though we can arm ourselves with more and better data, without hope, we cannot begin to address these challenges. If we abandon hope in the face of uncertainty, we risk the future of humanity.

We created this book to offer hope in relation to many of the major challenges facing societies. We weren't interested in offering theoretical fixes or idealistic, ungrounded, wishful thinking. We wanted hope to arise from people who were actively working with these challenges – *realistic hope*.

In this book we set out to achieve three things:

- 1 Demonstrate realistic hope in action;
- 2 Highlight the opportunities to make use of the future before it happens;
- 3 Provide a set of key principles that arise from these real examples, which anyone can use to leverage our greatest evolutionary trait – our ability to imagine and work together to create a future that is better for individuals and whole societies.

This book offers realistic hope for fourteen of today's pressing and most difficult global challenges, which will affect the future of us all.

### **Who we are**

One of us is a poet, and the other is a physicist. Both of us are experienced in designing and facilitating processes that seek to enhance the futures preparedness and enable the futures-shaping potential of communities and organisations. We do not have a crystal ball, but we do possess a combined experience of 60 years of practice working with different storytelling traditions – images, narrative, and numbers – that enable people to experience and 'rehearse' the future using immersive and interactive learning methods. We have worked with leaders and their organisations across the public, private, civic, and academic sectors and in every region of the world – from the futures of the Arctic and space exploration, to the redesign of education and the rebuilding of whole societies. And both of us are mothers, working for a better future for our children, which, in this interconnected world, means a better future for all children.

Angela trained as a physicist and began her career trying to use science to reduce future uncertainties about climate change and energy futures. She soon discovered that opportunities to 'speak truth to power' were very limited and challenging in evidence-based policy settings because of the messiness of politics, the immaturity of team-based decision-making, and the constraints and barriers leaders have to overcome in order to make significant change happen. She found it was not easy to 'connect the dots'

of the many-to-many perspectives and different interests and specialisms necessary to anticipate, appreciate, and address these complex and fast-moving challenges.

Betty Sue began her career as an academic, teaching and writing poetry and literary criticism – the analysis of stories. When she realised that the stories that most needed analysing were those that society was telling about itself and about what was real, she began to write and speak about the current global economic narrative, which is the story of the reality of our time. If the future is always and only a story, she argued, we can create better ones – and figure out how to get there. For the last 25 years, she has worked with politicians, government officials, lawyers, authors, architects, doctors, academics, security analysts, NGOs, the military, and corporations of many kinds to create and explore stories of the future as a way to transform the present.

### **What these chapters demonstrate**

Each chapter approaches one global challenge and first explains what makes that challenge so difficult and why some feel that meeting that challenge is hopeless. Yet, as our authors show, there is reason for hope because we can find realistic examples of success in meeting that challenge. Scaling these solutions often takes imagination, resilience, and new approaches to acting with futures.

The chapters show that there is no best or right approach or one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, they present stories of groups of people who are motivated by a common concern, guided by a shared vision, empowered by collaborative action, and persistent in their openness to continuous learning. Some tackle seemingly impossible challenges (net-zero emissions and a better life for all). Some take on important disciplines. Others talk about how we can avoid new conflicts, whether at the level of cyberwar or water wars. How can leaders approach these big, messy, interconnected challenges, especially in the context of democracies where trust in government is eroding?

*Realistic Hope* deals with many global challenges – but not all. In the process of writing brief overviews of the most promising developments in relation to security, climate change, job loss, food and water challenges, globalisation, technology, poverty, healthcare, democratic leadership, trust in government, and other issues, our authors were asked to keep the focus on one challenge at a time – but we realise that *all* of these global challenges are interrelated. By the end of the book, many of these



interconnections have emerged implicitly through many different voices and perspectives.

We conclude the book with a brief chapter describing the five principles of realistic hope that we have learned from working with the authors on all the chapters and offer an epilogue that calls on the power of the human will to turn our hope for a better future into reality.

**Whom this book is for**

The hopeful leader in us all.