

Some Notes on Envisioning

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When I was teaching I was responsible for a number of modules including two on Education for the Future and Education for Sustainability. Both of these used the process of envisioning to help students identify the key elements of their preferred alternative futures.

The field of futures studies helps people to become more active in envisioning their preferred future, to identify the way they would want the future to be, and how to act in their personal lives, work and community, in order to achieve that better future. Envisioning is therefore about helping people clarify the future they would prefer for their community rather than leaving this to outside forces. In helping people choose their preferred future they can then move in a direction that will help to facilitate this.

How can we ever attain a goal that we cannot imagine? How can we ever attain a more sustainable future unless we have developed the ability to envision alternative futures? This is the first step in identifying where we want to get to, but not the only step. Dennis Meadow, one of the authors of the original *Limits to Growth* report, explains:

Visioning means imagining, at first generally and then with increasing specificity, what you really want. That is, *what you really want*, not what someone has taught you to want, and not what you have been willing to settle for. Visioning means taking off the constraints of 'feasibility', of disbelief and past disappointments, and letting your mind dwell upon its most noble, uplifting, treasured dreams ... We should say immediately, for the sake of sceptics, that we do not believe vision makes anything happen. Vision without action is useless. But action without vision is directionless and feeble. Vision is absolutely necessary to guide and motivate. More than that, vision, when widely shared and firmly kept in sight, does *bring into being new systems*.

Envisioning workshops are used by a variety of groups and most recently by Transition initiatives to clarify what their community needs to look like in a post-carbon future. Envisioning helps identify preferred futures, the ones we most hope to see come about as a result of our deeply held values and notions of a more sustainable future. The process of envisioning can be carried out in various ways. It isn't something that can just be done over a cup of coffee since it requires a quiet space in which the imagination can be focused. My experience is that this taps much deeper and more heart-felt insights. The process requires a contemplative space where one can draw on images that come as much from intuition and the heart as intellect and the head.

Important early work on envisioning was carried out by Elise Boulding when she worked with peace activists worried about the nuclear arms race. What she

discovered was that whilst they were clear about what they opposed they found it difficult to visualise what they were for, the goal of their struggle – a world without nuclear weapons. What would such a society look like? What would be the steps required to bring such a world about? As her focus broadened she began to work with all sorts of groups with other concerns, ranging from church and community to businesses and other institutions. Only after clarifying the vision they were aiming for could the real work begin of identifying the skills, strategies and steps needed to help bring that vision about.

Envisioning workshops are always preceded by an assessment of the present situation, the problems and dilemmas that need transforming. For Transition Groups this is about our heritage of unsustainable practice, the political and economic structures that keep this in place and how it is manifested in the local community. In order to challenge and change these practices some vision of what the community might look like in a post-carbon future is required. The three questions all Transition initiatives ask are: Where have we come from? Where are we now? Where do we want to get to? The envisioning process helps answer the last question.

One of the most effective envisioning processes is essentially a guided 'journey' in the imagination, best done with eyes closed and guided prompts from a facilitator. Participants are asked to let images arise in response to questions such as 'What do you see around you in your post-carbon future? What is different? What has changed?' The task of the facilitator is solely to prompt the participants' imagination, not to suggest specific images. Most people are surprised at how easily images arise in the mind's eye, although some report sensing ideas rather than seeing images. After the visualisation, working individually and then in small groups, participants can flesh out the details of their preferred future for the community and create visual poster summaries of this. From analysing all of the displayed posters the group can begin to create its composite post-carbon vision for the community.

What always strikes me is that rather than being 'merely the imagination', as a friend once argued, the process taps into the deepest aspects of what it means to be human. What does a resilient post-carbon community that we would be proud to live in look and feel like? Once we have established the broad parameters of this vision Transition Chepstow will have its guiding star, a vision which uplifts, focuses and empowers the group for the next stage of committed planning and action.

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