



A Non-Apocalyptic Vision of the Future

In January, following the shooting in Tucson, there was a call for more civil discourse in the public arena. We were reminded that our words can indeed do even more damage than sticks and stones. Whether or not this issue was directly connected to the shooting, it was a good reminder that all our actions, including our speech, have an effect on the spirits of others.

One commentator called for a return to the values we all learned in kindergarten – and I think she’s absolutely right about the need for general niceness. But we might also need to think of how we can have a positive effect, as well as avoiding negative behaviours. We need to have a vision.

Have you ever noticed how visions of the future seem uniformly bleak these days? From Orwell’s 1984 to more current science fiction movies that are far more frightening if no less sinister, tales of the future range from sobering to twisted to horrific. Some of it might pass for edification if you believe that a certain degree of collective paranoia can keep us out of trouble. Most of the time, they’re entertaining and seemingly harmless. The problem is, as far as a vision of the future goes, there’s not a whole lot out there that’s inspiring or visionary, at least not at the level of popular culture.

Most of us believe in the need for personal dreams, and for faith in ourselves. Anyone who’s ever brought up a child knows that you have to believe in them in order to allow them to develop their capacities. If they’re fed nothing but negativity, that’s what they learn. It’s pretty easy to believe in children because we’ve been there ourselves. We remember our own moments of cruelty and foolhardiness, and yet for the most part we turned into reasonable facsimiles of responsible adults.

The toddler that couldn’t stand up for more than a millisecond is going to ride a bike across a continent? Hard to believe. The human race that brought us the Inquisition and the Fifth Reich is going to collectively eschew violence in favour of service to humanity?

This is where we run into a problem. None of us has ever witnessed anything beyond the current point in the evolution of humanity. We need some imagination, creativity and faith here, if we say that the human race, so recently a toddler itself in terms of its maturity, will develop unimagined capacities and virtues in the future.

Calling individuals and societies to spiritual values seems to be how the founders of the world’s faiths managed to inspire entire civilizations, using no more than the power of speech. The Virtues Project, created by Linda Kavelin-Popov, tells us to never shame or blame, but to call a child to a virtue by naming it. (Using our words!) It doesn’t take long before the child starts to use that language and develop in that direction.

I can’t claim to speak for other faiths, but I can tell you a bit about the vision of the founder of the Bahá’í faith, Bahá’u’lláh (1817-1892). He taught that a golden age of peace and prosperity will come about, although the transition to that age may be painful.

Regarding the individual, He said that sacrifice, cooperation, loving kindness and devotion to the common good are among the many qualities called for in this day. As far as institutions go, the

goal is to nurture and encourage the human potential. Those involved are called upon to consult among themselves and with those they represent, with extreme humility, open-mindedness, candour, and a high sense of justice and duty.

The vision for communities is to be spiritually oriented and unified, valuing and showing consideration towards all, regardless of age, gender, race, class, etc. Regarding the world community there's the teaching, *"It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."*

Bahá'u'lláh called for a system of administration that governs the planet with benevolence, through a non-competitive grassroots democracy, using a system of consultation that encourages creativity and discourages ego and power-seeking.

All faiths offer a guiding vision. Today, it's needed more than ever.

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