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Imaginable: How To See the Future Coming

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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There is a scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which a character approaches the three witches, asking them to foretell his future. He implores,

> If you can look into the seeds of time,
> And say which grain will grow and which will not,
> Speak then to me…. (Act 1, Scene 5)

There are so many ways to spend our finite time and resources, but which seeds are most likely to *ripen* and which are more likely to *wither*? Should I quit my job and go back to school? Should I pursue this relationship, take that opportunity, or invest in this stock?

As the election results emerging over the past few days have reminded us, predicting the future is a tricky business. But one of the best guides to the future I have found is Dr. Jane McGonigal. She has one of the most interesting job titles I have ever heard: **Director of Games Research and Development at the Institute for the Future**, a nonprofit organization in California. Her team develops simulations to help solve future global problems.

She's quite good at her job: she was named one of *Fast Company's* "Top 100 Creative People in Business" and one of the "Top 35 Innovators Changing the World Through Technology" by *MIT Technology Review*. And she's written a number of books. One accessible place to start investigating is her latest book titled *Imaginable: How to*

See the Future Coming and Feel Ready for Anything—Even Things That Seem Impossible Today.

That title is a play on the word *un*imaginable. And McGonigal has been attracting an increasing amount of attention because some simulations she ran a decade ago have been uncannily accurate in predicting *real* headlines about what really *did* happen in recent years in response to the pandemic, wildfires in the West, social media-fueled conspiracy theories, and more. It turns out that **many world events that may seem unthinkable before they happen are actually quite *imaginable* in advance** if we learn some of the practices at the core of the field of futurism (xx).

It is also significant that many of the people involved in Dr. McGonigal's simulations report that when their imagined events ended up happening, they found themselves better prepared psychologically than many other people. ***Imagining* a difficult future can help inoculate you against the most traumatizing aspects of future shock**, similar to what psychologists call pre-exposure therapy (xviii, 84).

Events may still be hard to deal with, but instead of feeling overwhelmed, you may feel more like, "I've seen this before and am equipped to deal with it (83)." So I invite us to spend a few minutes exploring some highlights from McGonigal's work to help make the *unimaginable* more *imaginable* and easier to deal with if it comes.

One of McGonigal's core practices is trying to imagine the world a decade from now. She calls this practice "taking a ten-year trip" (22). So, what do you think? What will the world be like in 2032? Many folks heard me say, at the recent celebration of my tenth anniversary as your minister, **"We often *overestimate* what we can get done in a year, and we often *underestimate* what we can get done in a decade."**

One way we can open our minds to what might be the case a decade from now is go the opposite direction: what was your life like *ten years ago,* in 2012 (37)? What were some of the most surprising changes that happened between then and now (38)?

As you consider the biggest changes in your own life over the past decade, I can share that, for me, that timeframe feels particularly poignant. Prior to March 2012, the possibility of becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister was not even on my radar

in any serious way. But today, a little more than a decade later, I feel quite solidly established in the UU world. A lot can happen in a decade! As we'll explore further in a few minutes, a decade is enough time for fledgling trends to develop and become mainstream. In the words of one science fiction writer, **"The future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed"** (110).

One of McGonigal's tricks for learning about emerging trends is to pick an area you are personally interested in forecasting, and then google that topic along with words like "advances," "breakthroughs," "opportunities," "forecast," "prediction" "surprising," or "strange" (127, 154). Suddenly you'll find a whole world of possibilities that may be forthcoming in the next decade or more.

Let's look at two specific examples: drones and facial recognition software. Drones are those mini, remote-controlled aircraft you may have seen flying around your neighborhood park. Maybe you own a drone, or know someone who does? From the growing popularity and affordability of drones, we can extrapolate that they may have an increasing impact in the future (111).

Here's one possible prediction: widespread deliveries-by-drone may be coming in the near future. Such drone deliveries could reduce theft by delivering to your backyard, an upstairs balcony, or other locations safer than your front porch. On the flip side, we will also need to consider drone flight paths and how we might prevent a future in which the sky is filled with a sea of drones.

As a second example, how many of you have a phone that "unlocks" itself using facial recognition software, which is a pretty cool trick. But as we imagine our ten-year trip into the future, how might our facial recognition data be misused? A quite imaginable future might include a facial recognition feature many of us have already grown accustomed to using on ourselves—being *reversed* to enable us to "face search" others or be face searched in return.

You can already do this in a limited way on Google right now. The next time you are on Google's home screen, notice the camera button on the right-hand side of the search field. In order to get more information, you can click on that camera icon, upload an image, and search for other places that photo appears.

It's probably already technically feasible to add an upgraded version of this feature, enabling you to subtly wave your phone in front of a stranger and get back a significant amount of information about them from social media and other databases. It's easy to imagine a future in which you might overhear people saying, **"Dude, did you just face search me?!"** (150).

Here's the thing: companies such as Facebook and Clearview AI already have *billions* of facially-identified photos in their databases. "And accuracy rates for facial recognition range from 90 percent at the low end to 99.98 percent at the high end." Furthermore, due to the pandemic, software has already been developed that is "99.9 percent accurate for mask wearers, using just the eyes and forehead for recognition" (152). Hopefully, imagining the future will embolden us to call for government regulation to protect our privacy and limit who has access to facial recognition databases (153).

Let me give you a few more quick examples, using a game Dr. McGonigal invented called "Stump the Futurist." To play, you start with everyday pieces of conventional wisdom that most people would assume will always be the same. The challenge is to brainstorm a way that this seeming truism might change in the future.

When McGonigal has played this game with her students over the years, one of the most common assertions is that it will always "take a man and a woman to make a baby" (67). It turns out that stopped being true six years ago, in 2016. Here's the headline: **"World's first baby born with new '3 parent' technique."** To avoid passing along a genetic disease, fertility specialists in England were able to "combine genetic material from *two women* and one man to make one baby" (67).

But, wait, there's more! Four years ago in 2018, some of you may have seen this *National Geographic* headline: **"Same-sex mouse parents give birth via gene editing"**: No male mouse was involved, and the offspring of the two moms have since had healthy babies themselves. Amazing! And scientists speculate that within a decade, *human* same-sex couples may be able to make an embryo using stem cells and gene editing with "no opposite-sex genetic material required" (69). The future is coming, ya'll. Get ready.

Now that that we are well over two years into this pandemic, there is growing clarity that there's no going back to a pre-pandemic 'normal' on a whole confluence of

levels (129). Here at UUCF, for example, we don't want to be an "in-person only congregation" in the age of Zoom, right?! We may eventually return to two *in-person* services, but we actually already have two Sunday Services; it's just that one of them in online. We have approximately the same number of people attending services both in-person and online. (Yes, it's a whole new world.)

There are also many parallel examples in the world of business giving evidence that the future is here, such as these:

- No one wants to be Blockbuster in the age of *Netflix.*
- No one wants to be Tower Records in the age of *Spotify.*
- No one wants to be Kodak in the age of *Instagram*.

These are just the beginnings of a much longer list of how current paradigms might radically change. Our invitation and challenge is to remain agile: to grow, flex, and adapt, even while remaining committed to our core missions and values, which remain unchanged even as our methods evolve.

So, what's coming next that can give us more *hope* in the face of change? Here's Dr. McGonigal's current best guess of "ten future forces that could make a better world in the next decade":

1. **mRNA vaccines** - The same incredible technology that brought us COVID-19 vaccines on an unbelievably fast timetable also has the potential "to prevent or cure cancer, malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV, among other diseases." There are, of course, no guarantees, but it's exciting that scientists are actively pursuing the potentially life-changing possibilities.
2. **Super-inexpensive solar/wind energy** - Green energy is on track to be "cheaper than fossil fuels everywhere on the planet," an advance which would significantly decrease air pollution and the carbon emissions causing climate change.

3. **Prioritizing social safety nets** - Younger generations are more in favor of prioritizing the "triple-bottom line" of people, planet, and profit—rather than solely focusing on the alleged bottom line that values profit over people and planet.
4. **"Bio-printing" technology** - "3-D printers may be capable of producing human organs out of biocompatible plastics" That's very cool, and could become a game-changer that resolves the long organ donation waiting list.
5. **Living concrete -** Formed from bacteria, gelatin, and sand, living concrete "absorbs carbon dioxide and releases oxygen." It also "self-regenerates: one brick cut in half heals and forms two bricks; those two can be cut in half to create four, and so on." Widespread use could be transformative for the future of the global construction industry.
6. **Direct cash transfers** - Pandemic stimulus checks gave us a glimpse into a future where a universal basic income may be more viable than many people previously considered.
7. **Cultured meat** - Meat grown in a laboratory is on course to be "more commonly sold worldwide than meat grown inside animals' bodies." Cultured meat is much better for the environment, significantly decreases cruelty to animals, and can be a sustainable global protein source.
8. **Increasing social connections** - To combat the adverse health and social impacts of isolation, there are fascinating experiments in the UK and Japan that other countries may soon emulate, in which "doctors prescribe cooking classes, walking clubs, art groups" and more—as well as government-funded communal living opportunities.
9. **Free or low-cost learning for a lifetime** - To expand our current commitment to funding public education through the high school years, support is growing for free community college and vocational training—in addition to widespread access to and support for online education.
10. **Anti-aging biotech** - New technologies have also already reversed the effects of aging in animal lab experiments, and have the potential to "start lengthening the healthy, active human lifespan by decades" (146-149).

As we've explored in previous weeks, we could also make a list of forthcoming major potential future *threats*. And I readily concede that we always have to account for the law of unintended consequences. But I don't want us to miss that there are some genuinely positive trends that seem to be emerging in the near future.

Perhaps the most import takeaway from the field of future studies is to *free your mind.* The way things are is neither the way they have always been nor the way they will always be. People in the past imagined the ways our society is structured today, which means we can collectively imagine better ways in the future—for all of us.

Our Unitarian Universalist living tradition is particularly well-primed to be open to future possibilities. As a line from one of our classic hymns proclaims, we seek "a freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more."

So as we peer through a glass darkly and seek to discern what the future may bring, let us also be honest that on many levels, we humans are still in our collective adolescence—with all the promise and peril those teenage years can bring. But there is still much reason to hope that we will continue to grow up and live into our potential as a species.

Along those lines, I'll give the last words to Dr. McGonigal: **"The future is a place where anything, or one hundred things, or *everything*, can be different—even things that seem impossible to change today."**