

“In a world that feels more destabilized than ever, I am grateful when people find ways out of dark places. I remind myself that even when things are bleak, under the right conditions, we can build a bright future. Here is my story.”

My Future Search Journey

By Sandra Janoff

Twenty-five years ago Marv Weisbord and I started working together on the planning method called Future Search to fine-tune the principles, deepen our understanding of the process, and develop the methodology. In 1993, we established Future Search Network offering pro-bono services to communities around the world. Today, people on all continents use Future Search to enable large diverse groups to confirm a common vision, create concrete action plans, and commit to implementation.

In this article I share my Future Search journey and what I have learned about creating the “right conditions” for change. By that I mean conditions that have enabled people to tackle intractable problems like hunger, child abuse, and drug trafficking or create breakthroughs in communities torn apart by racism or sectarianism. These conditions have also enabled people to build productive, meaningful, and sustainable workplaces (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010).

In a world that feels more destabilized than ever, I am grateful when people find ways out of dark places. I remind myself that even when things are bleak, under the right conditions, we can build a bright future. Here is my story.

The Journey Begins

I first encountered the impact of organizational structure as a teacher in an experimental high school for “hippie

teenagers” who were dropping out of traditional schools. It was the early 1980s and the school was my learning laboratory for systems change. When we on the staff found that students were having multiple schedule conflicts, we devised a way to involve them in building the schedule. Picture 200 students in a big room with a blank schedule template covering one wall. We put all the courses for the semester in a “hat” and held a lottery to create the order for slotting them into the schedule. As each course was selected, students who wanted that course met, along with the teacher, to negotiate days and times. It was a chaotic scene but four hours later the scheduling process was complete and everyone had a hand in it. This was just one example of involving young people in planning. Another was having students and parents on the operating board. We also held weekly community meetings to discuss internal issues and relevant outside events. We focused on strengths, built flexible structures and celebrated accomplishments. This was a “learning community.”

The end came, as it does to many successful experiments, when the funding ran out. For those years, though, we had the “right conditions” for the work we had set out to do. We educated young people and graduated them ready to contribute to society. I did not have the words then but we were involving “everybody in improving whole systems.” It is also confirming today to see these principles applied in

many methodologies such as Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry, and Future Search.

From Practice to Theory

It was now the late 1980s. I went to graduate school in psychology and immersed myself in individual, group, and systems theory. What I found intuitively obvious in practice was now confirmed and expanded upon by great thinkers of the 20th century: Sigmund Freud, Kurt Lewin, Ron Lippitt, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Eric Trist, Fred Emery, and more. If I was going to be in the business of change, I wanted to clarify my assumptions about change. I resonated with development theory that said individuals and groups develop greater capacity to tackle complex problems when they integrate, rather than reject, differences. In group-dynamics terms you see it when groups focus on their task rather than fragment and fight over differences. I would come to learn that groups were more likely to stay on task when the task was compelling, the right people were in the room, the leader was clear about boundaries, and the group could control and coordinate the work they were doing. These were all structural issues. From systems theory I appreciated that everything is connected to everything else. Change on one level of the system impacts the other levels. Here was the conceptual connection between group structure and individual behavior.

I was not drawn to behavioral models of change that focus more on expert influence, individual motivation, and personality traits. Seeing the group as a system meant creating structures within which people could do their best work. “Change the conditions under which people interact, rather than try to change the people.” These words are at the heart of the work that Marv and I do, but I do not want to get ahead of myself. I was still in graduate school and exploring.

From Theory to Research

I wanted to formally study the influence of structure on behavior but with an added dimension. The women’s movement in

the United States during the 1970s and 1980s shined light on the fact that men built theories of human development and confirmed their theories with male subjects. The accepted theory of moral development said that women used a less mature process than men for resolving tough decisions (Kohlberg, 1981). Carol Gilligan (1982) offered an alternative story. There is no single “right” voice. There are different voices – a rights-based voice and a relational voice. I wanted to see what happened to that relational voice under specific conditions. The context was the first year of law school, a hierarchic, expert-driven, rights-oriented, win-lose decision-making environment. The subjects were the men and women of the class entering Temple University Law School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1989.

A year later I had a picture and the data to support it. Women entering law school were more relational in their thinking. Their decisions were based on the particular context of the dilemma with concern for the people involved and not based only on rules and objectivity. At the end of the year, many women acknowledged that they were learning to silence themselves and adapt to the male-oriented environment. They were thinking less relationally and more objectively like their male counterparts (Janoff, 1991). These outcomes showed the influence of structure on behavior and went a step further. Traditional organizational structures, where hierarchy and outcome are valued over relationship and connection, often suppress a relational voice, the voice that is mainly carried by women. I say mainly carried by women, but not solely, because in those early days of Future Search, the leaders who sought our support were mostly men. These men valued relationships and dialogue and saw them as key to achieving significant outcomes.

Back to Practice

Marv Weisbord and I worked together while I was finishing graduate school and writing my dissertation. Marv had just published his breakthrough organization

development book, *Productive Workplaces*. At the heart of his work was his Learning Curve (Weisbord, 2012). He traced the evolution of workplace improvement from expert problem-solving to “everybody” improving whole systems. Future Search became the practical example of “everybody” improving whole systems.

To this collaboration, I brought insight I had gained from training in system-centered group dynamics (Agazarian & Janoff, 1993). Groups have a tendency to split over differences and potentially scapegoat a person who holds a different point of view. The system-centered perspective provided a powerful way to keep the group whole, while not having to work on individual behavior. As long as the person with a difference has an ally, at least one other person who joins in their point of view, the person is not scapegoated and the group can keep working without fighting or running away. This understanding provided a way for us to manage very diverse groups without having to negotiate conflicts or resolve all differences (Weisbord & Janoff, 2007).

It was the early 1990s and Future Search was stimulating a lot of interest. We were one of a handful of methodologies called Large Group Interventions (Bunker & Alban, 1992). The Future Search Network, founded in 1993, had 120 members. Early communication with our colleagues was through phone calls and letters. I can remember particular members of the Network who refused to get email addresses because they did not yet trust the technology. Marv and I were training people in the United States and working primarily with our western culture until a call from the Queen Emma Foundation in Oahu, Hawaii opened the door to the rest of the world.

Crossing Cultures

It was 1994 and we were invited to the community of Ko’olau Loa on the north shore of Oahu, Hawaii. This community, with the highest population of native Hawaiians in Hawaii, also had the highest incidence of diabetes, obesity, alcohol abuse, and teenage pregnancy. It had not

been always like this. Native Hawaiian communities used to be integrated fishing, farming, and hunting economies. Their way of life was destroyed by the influx of western business and practice. Elders in the community still knew what it meant to live a more holistic life and wanted to reconnect with their values of healthy mind, body, and spirit. Hideo Murakami, a Queen Emma Vice President, saw that Future Search principles were congruent with the Hawaiian belief system and had extended the invitation. Soon I was meeting the residents of the community and learning how right he was. I also learned a lesson about working in other cultures I would never forget.

I was meeting with a group that would become the Future Search Planning Group. About 20 minutes into my presentation of the Future Search principles, a native Hawaiian elder, who was patiently listening, smiled and said, “Sandra, we have a word that describes what you are saying.” One word I thought? “What is it?” I asked. “Laulima,” she said. “What does that mean?” “It takes many hands to do a task.” Laulima, I learned, is more than a word, it is a principle of the Hawaiian culture. No work is too big when shared by all. We proceeded to plan and then run a Future Search titled Ho’opono Ko’olau Loa: A Community Effort to Restore Community Values. Over three days, residents of Chinese, Japanese, Samoan, Fijian, and European descent, found their way back to these principles and moved forward together. This was when Marv and I began to understand why Future Search crosses cultural boundaries. Future Search is a container into which people pour their experience of their past, present, and hoped-for future. We do not impose a model of reality that comes from our culture. This was freeing for us and for the community. And it enabled us to enter in areas where people were not just at odds, but at war.

At War over Differences

In 1999, I got a call from Sharad Sapra, director of UNICEF’s Operation Lifeline Sudan. North and South Sudan were

in midst of a civil war and the children were suffering. There were no schools or medical care. Families were torn apart and some of the children had been forced to serve as soldiers. Sapra said he could do nothing about peace in the regions but he could do something for the children. Sapra wanted to hold two Future Searches, one for the children and the second where the children would join the adults. He could bring all the stakeholders, from inside and outside Sudan to a hotel conference room in Nairobi, Kenya. There they would have to face the fact that their children had no future unless they decided to do something about it.

Sapra offered me the challenge and I accepted. The first Future Search started with me sitting in a circle with 40 children, aged 12 – 18, from diverse tribes. It was their first time out of South Sudan and they had been trying to figure out bathtubs with running water, telephones, and televisions. They did not know what to make of this thing called Future Search they had been invited to.

The truth is that I did not know how to begin. I was as stupefied at that moment as any of the children. In the five years since working in Hawaii I had experiences in numerous cultures. Yet I had no idea what I was going to say to these young people. I knew that my usual opening sentence, “Let me tell you how this meeting is different from other meetings you have attended,” would not work. I looked around and into the eyes of the children looking up at me and found these words coming up from inside me.

“You are the future of your country,” I said. “Your voices are important.” I paused. At that moment something occurred to me. The children around the circle spoke six languages and there was no guarantee that even those who spoke English understood me. So I added, “Please raise your hand if you understand what I just said.” Three hands went up. So I repeated, “You are the future of your country. Your voices are important.”

Then I asked the translators to please translate to each child and asked the children to tell each other what I said, using their own words. Instead of staring

at me, they moved around, getting closer to their translators and to each other. As children were explaining to each other and to me what it meant, I kept adding, “Please raise your hand when you understand.”

I do not remember how long it took or how many times I repeated the sentence until all their hands were raised, but everyone in the circle was involved. In that short time something changed in me. I watched these children come alive as they were making meaning of this one sentence. Though I had come with minimum expectations about our ability to build a community, I still was not prepared for the obvious. You never know when you are really understood. Here we were, at the beginning of a Future Search, creating conditions to help each other really understand. This was simple and profound at the same time. The group agreed to a rule for the meeting. We would all make sure that everyone understood what we were saying before we moved on, no matter how long it took.

A Future for the Children

You can see this taking place on the video called The Children of South Sudan (see Recommended Resources). I learned many lessons. First, young people “get it.” They built a vision for their future and took it to the adult conference. Second, when I started the second Future Search I had to discard another phrase I had been using over the years. I used to say, “Even though we can’t predict the outcomes, you’ll discover your common ground agenda on which to take action.” In this case the adults in the room included members of two tribes that were at war with one another. I found myself saying, “We have an opportunity to find out *if* there is a common ground agenda for the future of the children.” It does not sound as significant as it felt. I was giving up any control I believed I had. I prayed that they would agree on a way forward for the children who, after three days, were in my heart. I knew I had set the right conditions. Change happens one step at a time and the participants had to decide what they would do each step of the way.

The meeting had the outcomes I had hoped for but it was not easy. There was a moment when tempers flared between tribal chiefs and land-rights issues came up. It was then that I had to offer a choice. Did they want to spend this meeting on the conflicts that could not be resolved here or did they want to focus on the future of the children? They could not do both in the time we had. The fact that the “right” people were there-- teachers, expatriate business people, healthcare workers, women from the villages, social service agency people, funders *and* the children themselves, gave them the will to step out of the fight and get back to talking about the children. The group created concrete plans for preparing teachers, building schools, getting books and materials into the country, and bringing health services to the villages. A year later, a second Future Search was held inside Sudan on demobilizing the child soldiers and 13,000 young boys were sent back to their villages.

Choosing to Act on Common Ground

What do I continue to learn on this journey? Around the planet, people are putting enormous energy into warring over differences. Imagine if they discovered things they agree and could work on together. The moment that tribal chiefs stopped shouting at each other and turned their attention to the children was a heart-stopper. In Future Search there is no shortage of heart-stopping moments. People often find themselves at a fork in the road. One path replays the fight. The other path is unknown territory. With deep respect for how difficult it is, I offer the choice. Walking into the unknown requires great courage. In Future Search no one has to do it alone.

In Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant civic leaders, politicians, young people, business and public servants left 30 years of civil strife outside the meeting room door to see if they could come out with an integrated economic development plan. They had to do something different in the face of a failing economy. The issues that divided them surfaced but they kept talking until

they had an agenda that worked for all. Using Future Search, they created the first-ever unified development plan for the city and won the bid for the first ever UK City of Culture. This courageous effort was led by Aideen McGinley. The 2013 City of Culture was a year-long celebration of a shared cultural heritage. I will not suggest that any of this was easy. The pull to go back to old habits was strong. For this community, the pull to go forward was stronger. Tangible proof that the city is healing can be found in a new and beautiful walking bridge, called the Peace Bridge. It connects the “cityside” (Catholic) to the “waterside” (Protestant). In a city of 160,000, over two million people have walked across the bridge since it opened in June, 2011. I had the honor to be one of them at the opening ceremony.

A Three-Day Meeting

Many leaders who have sponsored a Future Search apply the principles to every meeting they run. They assure that they: (a) have the right people in the room for the task, (b) have set aside enough time to do the work, and (c) schedule a next meeting that holds the same principles. These acts are transformational. We suggest that leaders run regular Review Meetings, which is an opportunity for people to ask, “What have we done, what are we learning, and what do we want to do next?” In this way, a three-day meeting builds new ways of working that can be sustained for years.

John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods Market, the natural foods supermarket with stores throughout the U.S., Canada, and the UK, sponsored his first Future Search in 1988 to build his strategic plan and then every 5 years after. He wrote in his book *Conscious Capitalism*, “We did our first Future Search about three years after we created our Declaration of Interdependence. The process was so powerful that we repeated it every few years... frequent enough to put forth a compelling guiding vision and long enough to allow for its implementation and refinement. It’s been inspiring for us to see our vision evolve over the 24 years

we have been doing this. Looking back we can see how much Whole Foods Market has successfully actualized the visions articulated in our Future Search meetings” (Mackey & Sisodia, 2014, p.174).

The Right Conditions

We humans have unlimited creativity when the conditions are right and we become habit-driven when they are not. One of the goals of Future Search is to create the conditions under which human beings can think and act creatively. Creativity requires three things: time, space, and permission. When the time is compressed, people share what they already know and hear what they are comfortable hearing, they rarely make new discoveries. When the space in which they are working lacks brightness and fresh air, people lose energy. When people are afraid of being judged or are expected to deliver specific outcomes, they hold back wild ideas. Future Search pushes against old habits. Once we have the right cast of characters, ~~require~~ enough time, the right space, and permission from those in authority to journey into the unknown, we are on a path of discovery. Those to me are the “right conditions.”

Changing the World One Meeting at a Time

This is my journey! I am blessed to have worked with children in South Sudan, United Kingdom, Northern Ireland, Sweden, United States, India, and Uganda. I am honored by the trust that clients place in me when they sincerely say, “I know you have worked with tough groups on tough issues, but my people and issue are different.” Then they put their faith in me and the work and we go forward. They are unconventional thinkers who want to make their world and the wider world a better place. How lucky am I? Very. As the chaos of the world overwhelms me I have a meeting to go to where we can make a difference. This is changing the world, one meeting at a time, by doing exactly what I can do. I cannot do more but I can do this. And it matters to me.

Future Search Principles (Weisbord and Janoff, 2010)

- » “Whole System” in the Room; a cross-section of those with authority, resources, expertise, information, and need. That means more diversity and less hierarchy than is usual in a planning meeting and a chance for each person to be heard and learn other ways of looking at the task.
- » Explore “Whole Elephant” before Acting on a part: that means thinking globally before acting locally. This enables every person to talk about the same world – one that includes all perceptions.
- » Focus on Future and Common Ground – not past problems and conflicts: we treat problems and conflicts as essential information, not action items. That means identifying shared values and joint actions steps while honoring differences rather than having to reconcile them.
- » Self-management and Responsibility for Action: use dialogue, not “problem solving” as the main tool. This means helping each other do the tasks and taking responsibility for the actions.

Recommended Resources

Future Search Network – www.futuresearch.net

The Network is a collaboration of hundreds of consultants world-wide who offer Future Search services to communities and nonprofits for whatever they can afford. The website includes member stories from all sectors, case studies, materials and videos.

The Children of South Sudan (26 min)

A video documenting UNICEF-sponsored Future Searches with Sudanese children and adults to address the crisis of losing a generation of children to the turmoil of a brutal civil war.

<http://www.futuresearch.net/network/videos/index.cfm>.

Interview with Sandra Janoff in Cologne, Germany (7 min)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4bdxAU1uGU>

G8 Youth Summit, Northern Ireland (6 min)-

100 young people from across Northern Ireland gathered in a Future Search. It was held one month before the 2013 G8 Summit of world leaders and in the same location. The outcomes of their work together were presented to the leaders in a communique written in four languages: English, French, German, and Japanese.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2ttQN6y2vk>

Interview with Sandra Janoff and Marvin Weisbord in Netherlands on Future Search and their philosophy for running many meetings- (2:36 min)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPgGv48r_D8

Cartoon that illustrates the Future Search principles- (3 min)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfTHKwvAbiA>

Future Search to end violence against women and children in Uganda, sponsored by UNICEF- (3 min)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xDQ_namEwo

Future Search in Salford, UK that involved adults and children in civic issues- (7:54 min)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wXl1ZSqust>

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Sandra Janoff, PhD, Co-Director of the Future Search Network, co-developed the principle-based methodology called Future Search, a process used world-wide to get the “whole system” focusing on the future and creating values-based action strategies. She has led strategic planning meetings all over the world and taught the principles to thousands of people. She co-authored *Future Search: Getting the Whole System in the Room for Vision, Commitment, and Action* (2010), *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There! Ten Principles for Leading Meetings that Matter* (2007) and *Lead More, Control less: Eight Advanced Leadership Skills that Overturn Convention* (2015). She can be reached at sjanoff@futuresearch.net.

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