Developing Constructive, Optimistic, and Creative Attitudes and Behaviors about the Future

Part III: The Self-Narrative, Optimism and Self-Efficacy, and the Evolving Future Self

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"People often say that this or that person has not yet found himself. But the self is not something that one finds. It is something that one creates."

Thomas Szazz

This article is the third in a series of papers dealing with the nature of future consciousness and ways to enhance it. The series draws from my book *The Evolution of Future Consciousness*[1] and aligns with a set of workshops on future consciousness I am offering at Rio Salado College in Tempe, Arizona. The first article examined deep learning, emotion and motivation; the second paper addressed cognitive processes relevant to future consciousness, such as memory, thinking, imagination, foresight, planning, problem solving, insight, and wisdom.[2] In this article I explore the connection between our sense of personal identity and future consciousness. I look at how the stories or self-narratives we tell ourselves about our lives and who we are affect our visions of our future; how the character traits of optimism, pessimism, and self-efficacy are related to human happiness and how these traits impact our future; and how we can create a more evolved, future-oriented sense of self-identity. Finally, I discuss the relationship between character virtues and the sense of a future self.

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In his book, *The Feeling of What Happens*, noted neurophysiologist Antonio Damasio argues that the cognitive dimension of self-consciousness exists in the form of a self-narrative – an "autobiographical self" – consisting of a story a person tells him or herself about his or her life. This self-narrative connects personally significant events in the past with the present self. Further, the self-narrative connects the present and the past with an envisioned journey of who the person will become in the future.[3] Hence, the autobiographical self not only contains a sense of passage through time – the self is a temporal and dynamic reality rather than a static thing - but necessarily contains a component of the future, of the goals and direction a person identifies in his or her life. This

self-narrative, in tying together past, present, and future, provides temporal coherence and dramatic meaning to consciousness and self-identity. The autobiographical self answers the questions of how we have come to where we are and where the ongoing journey of the self is heading in the future.

Damasio notes that we are both the main character in as well as the author of our self-narrative. As the creator of our narrative, we interpret and mold the meaning and substance of our life journey and consequently who we are. The psychiatrist Anthony Reading, in his book *Hope and Despair*, concurs with this self-creative, narrative view of personal identity, stating that self-consciousness is like interactive TV.[4] We both watch ourselves and attempt to modify and direct what we see on the "screen" of consciousness. Moreover, the "data" of self-consciousness (our memories, feelings, and thoughts) are open to continual re-interpretation. We can decide to rethink what has happened to us in the past, as well as reinterpret who we are in the present. The self is a creative act. Finally, according to Reading, our sense of freedom and choice within self-consciousness is inextricably tied to future consciousness. Choices are different possibilities we are aware of regarding what we can do and what we can become in the future. In reflecting on our self-narrative, and with an awareness of what we might do or become in the future, we make choices among perceived possibilities regarding how we want the story to continue. Without a future-oriented consciousness of possibilities and the decision making capacity to select among these possibilities we would not possess free will.

Perceived self-efficacy is one of the most fundamental qualities or character traits of the self. This character trait has to do with our sense of control or influence over the future. Studied extensively by the psychologist Albert Bandura, individuals with low self-efficacy feel powerless over the future, tend to set unrealistic goals for themselves in the future, and show little persistence or determination, giving up easily if any struggle or challenge is encountered in realizing a goal. People with high self-efficacy feel that they have control over the future, set realistic goals for themselves, and show persistence and tenacity in reaching their goals.[5] Perceived self-efficacy, I would suggest, is almost certainly connected to a person's self-narrative; individuals who possess a self-narrative involving frustration, repeated failure, perceived incapacity, and low expectations for the future would possess low self-efficacy, whereas people with a self-narrative involving success and personal accomplishment would have high self-efficacy. Although self-narratives involve an interpretive component, a person's actual history of success and failure impacts both the overall tone of the narrative and consequently his or her expectations of success in the future. As noted in an earlier article, memories of the past strongly influence anticipations of the future.

Connected with perceived self-efficacy are the general attitudes of optimism and pessimism. These attitudes clearly have a future consciousness component, for optimism means, among other things, a positive and hopeful view of the future, whereas pessimism entails a negative and hopeless view. Optimists believe that they are capable of positively affecting the future, whereas pessimists believe that they are helpless in affecting the future. The psychologist Martin Seligman, in his book *Learned Optimism*, outlines many of the

psychological and behavioral features of optimism and pessimism.[6] Optimists tend to believe that misfortunes are short-lived, limited in effect, and due to external circumstances; pessimists believe that misfortunes have long term and pervasive effects and are due to their own personal flaws and errors. Pessimists blame themselves for their problems. People can possess both optimistic and pessimistic dimensions to their personalities, for example, being optimistic about their professional lives and pessimistic about their personal or romantic lives.

Interestingly, optimism and pessimism are self-fulfilling prophecies; both are supported and reinforced by personal experience and the "facts" of a person's life. If a person expects things to go well, that expectation increases the chances that things will go well (of course it is no guarantee), whereas if a person expects things to go poorly, that increases the chances of problems and misfortunes. People will act in ways to confirm and maximize the chances of their beliefs being true, optimists and pessimists alike. In this regard, optimism and pessimism both create "snowball" effects; successes build on themselves, whereas failures reinforce themselves.

Although experiencing repeated and significant successes and good fortune can alter a pessimist's attitude toward the optimistic end, and experiencing repeated and significant failures and misfortunes can move an optimist toward the pessimist end, Seligman believes that optimism and pessimism are not simply under the control of the environment, but are ingrained habits of thought. Seligman, in fact, has developed various psychological techniques and strategies to help people alter there habits of thinking. Optimism and pessimism are learned habits and can be changed through behavioral and cognitive exercises. As the title of his book suggests, enhanced optimism is something that can be learned; a person's attitude toward the future and toward his or her capacity to influence the future in a positive way can be modified. This is not to suggest that pessimism about the future has no value and should be eliminated within human psychology. Both optimism and pessimism have value. A pessimistic attitude provides the necessary foresight regarding what can go wrong. As the philosopher of time J. T. Fraser stated, "Nightmares are dreams whose usefulness is to keep us on our toes."

Another psychological trait connected to both self-efficacy and the optimism-pessimism continuum is perceived locus of control. People can vary from seeing themselves as possessing an internal locus of control, where they perceive events that happen to them as due to their own actions, versus seeing their lives as having an external locus of control, where they perceive events that happen to them as due to external factors over which they have no control. Someone with an internal locus of control sees his or her self as the determining factor in life; someone with an external locus of control sees his or her life as under the control of external forces.[7] Within such a model of personality, an optimist as well as a person with high self-efficacy would perceive him or herself as having an internal locus of control with respect to the future – they would see themselves as having power over the future. On the other hand, pessimists and people with low self-efficacy would see themselves more as powerless victims regarding their future – from their perspective the future is controlled by external

forces. Connecting back to the self-narrative theme, people can create and sustain stories in which they are portrayed as passive and victimized through life, or proactive and in control of their lives – these narratives are played out into the future.

Recent pop psychology and modern pop culture has been especially concerned with the quality of self-esteem and how to help people develop it. Over the last few decades it has been in vogue to proclaim how everyone is special and, in particular, to strongly praise and regularly reinforce in young children a positive self-image (regardless of how well they actually do). Yet inflated self-esteem that is not built on real and substantial accomplishments can lead to frustration, disappointment, and depression in life.[8] As Howard Bloom notes, real self-confidence and happiness is built on meeting and successfully dealing with challenges in life, rather than simply being told that one is great.[9] On this point, the psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has devoted considerable study to the phenomenon of "flow," the experience of being psychologically immersed in sufficiently challenging tasks, which according to Csikszentmihalyi generates happiness in people.[10] Not only can one argue that real self-confidence (or self-efficacy) only develops through successfully meeting challenges, but that happiness is the direct result of setting and meeting sufficiently demanding goals. One's sense of a future self must include identified goals that sufficiently challenge the individual.

The future can be something we look forward to with hope or something that we fear. Who we will become in the future is also something we can look at either positively or negatively. Karniol and Ross distinguish two fundamental types of a future self.[11] First, there is the self we hope to become – the good person – identified as the "ideal self" by Karniol and Ross; second, there is the self we want to avoid in the future – the bad person – identified as the "ought self". Just as there appear to be two major components to our internalized morality – the do's and the don'ts – there seem to be two major moral visions of our future self. Life, or the future, can basically be seen as a challenge to realize our ideal selves – to create a positive self-narrative, and to avoid a negative self-narrative.

But what indeed is a positive self-narrative for the future? Again, referring to Csikszentmihalyi, in *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium*, he discusses classical models of the ideal self that identify various virtues or character traits, such as faith, rationality, balance, or love and forgiveness, as capturing the essence of human excellence. Csikszentmihalyi though finds the modern Western image of the ideal self as sensationalistic, superficial, and hedonistic. Instead he proposes that the ideal self of the future needs to move beyond the selfish needs of the body, the ego, and one's particular culture, and identify with something transcendent to these limiting identities. In reviewing Csikszentmihalyi's writings I find three important dimensions of transcendence: the ecological, the evolutionary, and the cosmic. According to him, the ideal self of the future should identify with all of humanity and with the environment in which we all find ourselves; with the progressive process of evolution and the role each of us plays to further this process; and with the cosmos as a whole for

we are all children of the universe. Csikszentmihalyi refers to individuals who search out experiences of flow in their lives, who repeatedly immerse themselves in something that goes beyond themselves, as "transcenders." [12]

Walter Truett Anderson also discusses where the self is heading in the future. Anderson traces the history of the Western vision of the self and suggests that for various reasons we need to move beyond the idea of a single, unified, static, and continual self. The self needs to become more multi-faceted and fluid in the future.[13] The Post-modern era, and the opening up of virtual selves through computer/Internet technology, requires the abandonment of the idea of a single true self. In fact, Anderson argues that, in the spirit of a new Enlightenment, we need to transcend our identification with a personal ego or a limiting cultural heritage that separates us from others and the world, in favor of a conscious sense of "oneness" and connectedness with all reality.[14] Clearly, there is a level of agreement between Anderson and Csikszentmihalyi on the future of the self.

In his book *Evolution's Arrow*, John Stewart highlights the theme of evolution in discussing the future human self.[15] Stewart argues that people should consider present trends and extrapolate where these trends might be heading in the future, and based on this extrapolation, they should consider and work toward a future self that would thrive in such a reality. We should see ourselves a fundamentally transformative and capable of directing real change within ourselves. (We are not static beings.) In fact, we should view ourselves as evolutionary beings existing in an evolutionary universe. In the spirit of Barbara Marx Hubbard's concept of "conscious evolution," or what I would call "purposive self-evolution," each of us should see ourselves as directing or guiding a dynamic and progressive self-journey – we are evolutionary selves and the creators/authors of this evolutionary personal reality. Stewart sees the ideal self of the future as increasing in future consciousness.[16]

Finally, in completing this survey of the self and future consciousness, I return to the ideas of Martin Seligman, who in his book *Authentic Happiness*, argues that deep and long-lived happiness comes through the pursuit and development of certain basic, universally acknowledged character traits, such as wisdom, temperance, and courage. Within philosophy these traits are usually referred to as virtues. In resonance with Anderson and Csikszentmihalyi, Seligman lists transcendence as one of the key traits which is of critical importance to happiness in life. But I should also highlight that for Seligman, the character traits he lists are not qualities of the self one is born with, but rather qualities that require effort to develop and realize. In fact, in another article, I have proposed that the central virtue that all others depend upon is self-responsibility – the belief and disposition to act as if one's happiness and well-being in life depends on one's own effort. This virtue is clearly connected with the trait of self-efficacy and the theme of conscious, purposive evolution; the individual who acts as if he or she has power over life, the future, and in particular, his or her self-identify in the future, realizes happiness. I would also add that identifying a set of virtues as personal goals for oneself in the future highlights a central ethical dimension in the preferable self of the future.[17]

As a concluding question, participants in the workshop on the self and future consciousness are asked to envision an ideal future self and future self-narrative in which certain basic virtues are pursued and developed further. Drawing upon Seligman's list, but adding to it, I provide a list of basic virtues to start from: Self-responsibility, wisdom, courage and faith, love and compassion, temperance, justice and reciprocity, transcendence and evolution, truth and honesty, loyalty and fidelity, and gratitude. In the last workshop (and article) in the series, I focus on how these virtues enhance one's capacity to constructively and productively approach the future.

[1] Lombardo, Thomas *The Evolution of Future Consciousness*. Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2006. See Pages 46 – 53 for a discussion of the relationship between self-identify and future consciousness.

[2] Lombardo, Thomas "Developing Constructive and Creative Attitudes and Behaviors about the Future: Part One – Deep Learning, Emotion, and Motivation" in World Futures Study Federation *Futures Bulletin*, Volume 31, No. 6, November, 2006; Lombardo, Thomas "Developing Constructive and Creative Attitudes and Behaviors about the Future: Part Two – Thinking and Imagination" in World Futures Study Federation *Futures Bulletin*, Volume 32, No. 1, January, 2007.

[3] Damasio, Antonio *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999. Damasio also discusses a "core self" which is the feeling-proprioceptive awareness of self and body.

[4] Reading, Anthony *Hope and Despair: How Perceptions of the Future Shape Human Behavior*. Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004.

[5] Hergenhahn, B.R. and Olson, Matthew *An Introduction to Theories of Personality*. 6th Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003, Chapter Eleven.

[6] Seligman, Martin *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*. New York: Pocket Books, 1998.

[7] Rotter, Julian "Internal versus External Control of Reinforcement: A Case Study of a Variable" *American Psychologist*, Volume 45, 1990.

[8] Seligman, Martin, 1998.

[9] Bloom, Howard *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition into the Forces of History*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995.

[10] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

[11] Karniol, Rachel and Ross, Michael "The Motivational Impact of Temporal Focus: Thinking About the Future and the Past" *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 47, 1996.

[12] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium.* New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

[13] Anderson, Walter Truett *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person*. New York: Putnam, 1997.

[14] Anderson, Walter Truett *The Next Enlightenment: Integrating East and West in a New Vision of Human Evolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.

[15] Stewart, John *Evolution's Arrow: The Direction of Evolution and the Future of Humanity*. Canberra, Australia: The Chapman Press, 2000.

[16] Hubbard, Barbara Marx *Conscious Evolution: Awakening the Power of Our Social Potential*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 1998.

[17] Seligman, Martin *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. New York: The Free Press, 2002; Authentic Happiness- http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/; Positive Psychology Center - http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/; Lombardo, Thomas and Richter, Jonathon "Evolving Future Consciousness through the Pursuit of Virtue" in *Thinking Creatively in Turbulent Times*. Didsbury, Howard (Ed.) Bethesda, Maryland: World Future Society, 2004.