

INTRODUCTION



Welcome to the Age of Unimaginable Events and Unthinkable Change

THE STATE OF THE PLANET IS ONE OF COLLECTIVE SHOCK.

In the years 2020 and 2021 alone, there were over 2.5 million English-language news stories with the word “unimaginable” in them.

There were over three million news stories with the word “unthinkable.”¹

We’ve all lived through these stories together.

Stories about the previously unimaginable impacts of a pandemic: health care systems collapsing, hundreds of millions of “nonessential” jobs vanishing overnight, the average life expectancy dropping by years on the global scale.

Stories about the previously unthinkable changes we made to survive the pandemic: border lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, school closures, mask mandates, remote work, remote everything.

Stories about unprecedented weather events and their toll on our towns and bodies: record-breaking heat, flooding, extreme storms, relentless wildfires, toxic air pollution.

Stories about strange things we'd never seen before: An apartment building eroded by climate change collapsing in the middle of the night. A mob storming the US Capitol in an attempt to overturn the results of a presidential election. A shockingly effective misinformation campaign that convinced 20 percent of Americans the government was injecting microchips into vaccines, leading them to reject a free, lifesaving intervention.

The ubiquity of the words “unthinkable” and “unimaginable” in our stories tells us something important about our global condition. We feel blindsided by reality. We find ourselves struggling to make sense of events that shattered our assumptions and challenged our beliefs.

And it's not just that we didn't see this coming. There is grief baked into these words. We use the word “unimaginable” as another way of saying “heartbreaking”—as in unimaginable pain, or unimaginable loss, that defies even our best efforts at empathy. We use the word “unthinkable” to mean “unjust,” “cruel,” or “unacceptable”—as in an unthinkable failure to act, an unthinkable lack of concern for others. These two words that we use so frequently these days speak not just to shock but to trauma.

How do we make plans for the future in an age of seemingly endless shocks? How can we feel at peace or secure today, when we are constantly bracing ourselves for the next “unimaginable” event or “unthinkable” change? How do we feel hope for our future, when it seems impossible to predict what the world will be like next week, let alone next year?

But perhaps we need to start with more fundamental questions. Were the most shocking events of the recent past really unimaginable before they happened? Should their consequences really have been unthinkable to us before we lived through them?

Let me tell you a story.

. . .

IN EARLY JANUARY 2020, WHEN the pandemic was first appearing on people's radar, I started getting a lot of interesting emails and text messages that all said something like this: "Jane, didn't you run a simulation of a respiratory pandemic? What do you make of what's going on right now? What should we be doing?" These messages were coming not just from my friends and family but from top executives at the biggest Silicon Valley tech companies, from government agencies, from international foundations. And they were right: yes, I had run a pandemic simulation.

I'm a game designer, and I specialize in creating simulations that help people imagine the biggest global challenges we might face in the future. In 2008, I was the lead designer for a six-week future-forecasting simulation called Superstruct. The simulation was run by the Ten-Year Forecast group at the Institute for the Future in Palo Alto, California. Our goal was to map out the full range of economic, political, social, and emotional ripple effects of global threats like pandemics. We set the game eleven years in the future, in the fall of 2019. During this game, nearly ten thousand people worldwide simulated living through five different threats, including a global outbreak of a fictional virus called ReDS, short for respiratory distress syndrome.

There were no mathematical computations involved in our simulation. Instead, we simply asked people to predict how they personally would feel and what they would do in their own lives during this kind of rapidly spreading outbreak. How would they change their daily habits? What social interactions would they avoid? Would they—could they—work from home? Would they choose to self-quarantine—and if so, when, why, and for how long? During a government-mandated quarantine, what problems might they experience? What kinds of support and resources would they need? How would they try to help others? Our simulation was low on algorithms but high on social and emotional intelligence. Our participants told thousands of stories

about what they, personally, would do during a respiratory pandemic, which we collected and analyzed online.

When the novel coronavirus first came to global attention in early 2020, I thought the most important findings to share with the world from our massive multiplayer simulation would be the predictions that people had made. For example, one of my main research questions had been: Under what circumstances would people resist voluntary quarantine and social distancing? Our data showed the most likely superspreading risks would be religious services, followed by weddings and funerals. People were likely to continue participating in these activities no matter what the perceived risks. And we saw clearly that if they were young and single, people still wanted to go out to nightclubs and parties, even if these gatherings were illegal.

Based on our findings, early in February 2020, I held an “Ask a Futurist” public webinar with my colleague at the Institute for the Future, Vanessa Mason. We gave our best urgent advice for the newly unfolding pandemic that barely had a name yet. For example: “Data suggests that if you lead a religious congregation or community of any kind, you need to plan now to create a space for virtual religious worship.” And: “If you’re planning a wedding, professional conference or networking event, or party, you should proactively cancel it now, because people will risk their health to attend these affairs even during a pandemic.” The headlines that followed in the months after clearly proved these insights from our simulation to be both useful and actionable. During the real pandemic, people did what our players predicted they would do during our simulation: they held large weddings despite rules against it, went to nightclubs despite the urgent messaging to stay at home, participated in in-person religious services despite testing positive for COVID-19, attended funerals despite having symptoms and being told to self-isolate. And these scenarios all turned into common, real-world superspreading events.²

In the February 2020 webinar and in my advice to people who contacted me, I also shared our data on how uncomfortable many people felt about wearing masks. During the Superstruct game, we

asked people to actually go out into their everyday lives and practice wearing masks in different social environments. We wanted people to get used to this habit, so it might be easier to adopt again in a real pandemic. But based on what players self-reported, we knew how high the social barriers might be to overcome mask resistance and to make the behavior feel “normal.” Of course, we saw this problem play out on a much larger scale during the real COVID-19 pandemic later, especially in the United States.

And we talked about how big a problem we anticipated it would be for working moms if schools closed during the pandemic, because moms in our game talked about the impossibility of juggling their jobs with the need to homeschool, if it came to that. Now, we see that, as a result of COVID-19, millions of moms had to voluntarily leave the workforce to care for children when schools closed down.³

One more bit of research we reported in the webinar was how hard it would be for people to follow public health guidelines, and to stay home or self-isolate, if they weren’t given significant economic support. We talked about the need to proactively provide cash payments, and today, when we consider the global COVID-19 response, we see clearly that in places where governments provided recurring cash payments or paycheck protection, people did follow the guidelines more strictly, and the spread of the virus was better contained.⁴

I’m proud of how accurate our forecasts turned out to be. But now, looking back at how slow society was to react to the growing threat and how stuck so many of our leaders were in old ways of thinking and doing, I no longer believe that the most important work of a large-scale social simulation like Superstruct is to accurately predict what people will do. Instead, the most important work of a future simulation is to prepare our minds and stretch our collective imagination, so we are more flexible, adaptable, agile, and resilient when the “unthinkable” happens.

And based on Superstruct, we have evidence that future simulations can have this positive effect. In January 2020, I started receiving emails and Facebook messages from people who had participated in

the pandemic simulation. They wrote things like, “I’m not freaking out, I already worked through the panic and anxiety when we imagined it ten years ago.” They said, “Mask up!” and “Time to start social distancing!” and “I’m starting to prepare for this now,” weeks before it hit mainstream consciousness outside of China that we needed to start making serious changes to our habits and plans. Simulation participants kept telling me, in their own ways, that pre-feeling the future helped them pre-process the anxiety, the overwhelming uncertainty, and the sense of helplessness, so they could move more rapidly to adapt and act resiliently when the future actually arrived.

The simulation participants’ early 2020 messages remind me now of what we would later see play out during the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Experts have noted that in places that suffered major outbreaks of the first severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, governments and businesses spent less time debating whether to take strong measures to prevent the spread of the novel virus. They acted faster, because they knew firsthand how bad things could get. And citizens in countries that had lived through the deadly 2003 SARS outbreak adopted public health measures like masking and social distancing faster, and more willingly, than their Western counterparts.⁵ All of this led to significantly more containment of the virus. A similar phenomenon occurred in West Africa, where local experience with the 2014 Ebola outbreak led countries to adopt much stronger measures than seen in Europe or the Americas, and faster. There was also higher compliance with mask wearing. This fast response due to previous pandemic experience has been cited as the primary reason that most African countries fared much better than their Western counterparts during the first two waves of the pandemic, despite having far fewer resources.⁶

What I see in my simulation participants’ reactions to COVID-19 is something almost like the fortitude of having lived through a real pandemic. Their minds were prepared to act faster and adapt faster. Less shock, more resilience. And it wasn’t just because more than a decade ago they’d imagined themselves living through a pandemic.

The simulation had kick-started a habit, for many, of paying closer attention to real-world pandemic news. As one participant wrote me, “I’ve been following what’s happening in Wuhan closely, you could say I’ve had my radar up for pandemic news since Superstruct. It just always stuck in my mind to keep paying attention.” I’ve observed this fascinating and common “side effect” of participating in a future simulation countless times. A deep immersion into a possible future creates lasting mental habits, especially when it comes to watching the real world for evidence that the simulated possibility is becoming more likely.

Now, it’s one thing to get lucky and run a single accurate simulation. But if I’m going to convince you to read the rest of this book and make futures thinking a regular part of your life, I’d better tell you another story.

In 2010, I led another large-scale future simulation game, this time for the World Bank. It was called EVOKE, and it was set a decade in the future, in the year 2020. This time, nearly twenty thousand players showed up to predict what actions they could take to help others during a complex outbreak of possible future global crises, including a pandemic and extreme weather from climate change happening at the same time. EVOKE ran for ten weeks, and each week a new compounding crisis was added to the mix.

Players were immersed in a future world that was dealing with a global respiratory pandemic called the Pearl River flu that had started in China . . . *and* an outbreak of social media–driven misinformation and conspiracy theories about the pandemic . . . *and* historic wildfires up and down the West Coast of the United States due to climate change . . . *and* a shocking collapse of the power grid due to aging infrastructure and extreme weather. The misinformation and conspiracy theories, spread in our story by a group we called “Citizen X,” complicated the efforts of individuals to understand what was really happening and what they needed to do to stay safe. Meanwhile, the wildfires and power outages forced many to leave their homes at a time when staying safe from the pandemic meant staying at home.

The storylines that we wrote a decade in advance turned out to be pretty much exactly what we saw in the headlines of the real 2020 and early 2021. First the global spread of COVID-19 in early 2020, followed by the historic West Coast wildfires of the summer of 2020 that burned for months and required millions of people to evacuate their homes and relocate. Then, the rise of the QAnon conspiracy movement on social media, which created an “infodemic” of misinformation that COVID-19 was a hoax and vaccines would implant a microchip in your arm. Later, the “unthinkable” power grid failure in Texas that left three million people without electricity or water, blamed on “unimaginable” extreme cold weather that the aging infrastructure was unable to withstand. You would be hard-pressed to find a prediction in the EVOKE simulation that didn’t turn out correctly, most of them in the very same year we forecast they might happen.

Which explains why, in the middle of the real year of 2020, I got a call from Robert Hawkins, a senior World Bank executive, who led the educational outreach and technology strategy on the EVOKE project. He said, “Look at how many specific forecasts from EVOKE are happening now! It’s uncanny. How did you get so much right?”

And that’s a question I’m going to answer by way of this book.

In Part I: Unstick Your Mind, I’m going to teach you some mental habits that professional futurists practice, and some social games that we play, to keep our minds open to “unthinkable” and “unimaginable” possibilities. You can use these habits and games to train *your* brain to think like a futurist.

When you think like a futurist, you think more creatively. You’re not stuck in old patterns or limited by what has been true in the past. And more than getting you ready for the future, these futures-thinking habits and games can make you feel better today. Research studies have shown them to increase hope and motivation for the future and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety. So if like many millions of others, you have some emotional healing to do after the pandemic and other shocks of the recent past, I believe these techniques will

help. Think of them as a kind of post-traumatic growth for our post-pandemic planet.

Because I want you to have confidence in these techniques, I'll share with you the science behind how futures thinking strengthens key pathways in the brain to build realistic hope, creativity, and a more resilient response to stress. And while I can't offer you an fMRI scan to show you how *your* brain is activated by futures thinking, I can teach you the same scoring methods that researchers use in scientific studies to document the benefits of futures thinking. You'll be able to measure your own progress so that you can be confident your personal growth is real.

In **Part II: Think the Unthinkable**, I'm going to show you how to use the same techniques that we used at the Institute for the Future to develop our highly accurate Superstruct and EVOKE forecasts—so you can start to see what's coming too. These techniques will help you spot any kind of change faster—so you can act faster, adapt faster, and not be blindsided by surprising events.

Finally, in **Part III: Imagine the Unimaginable**, we will play a brand-new game together so you can get firsthand experience of the power of a social simulation. I will lead you through three different future scenarios set in the year 2033. You'll be immersed in a world in which things we take for granted today change virtually overnight, and new social movements, technologies, and policies transform every aspect of our lives in surprising and profound ways. You will be able to participate in the simulations just by reading this book and keeping a journal for ten days about your mental time travel to the year 2033. How would you, personally, react to these scenarios? What would you think, feel, and do? How would you help? If you wish to share some of your future stories with others, and see what others are imagining, there will be a place online for you to do that as well.

These simulations will truly put to the test all of the skills and habits you've learned in the first two parts of *Imaginable*. I assure you the scenarios you encounter will sound as “far out” and inconceivable to you today as the Superstruct and EVOKE scenarios seemed to our

simulation participants in 2008 and 2010. But by the time you reach this part of the book, you *will* be ready to imagine them.

Then it's your turn to make the future. I'll explain my design process and give you all the information you need to create and run your own social simulation, about any future topic you want.

Along the way, I will be giving you many forecasts for the next decade of unthinkable change, covering everything from the future of learning and the future of work to the future of food and the future of money; from the future of social media and the future of health care to the future of climate action and government—all so you have a better idea of the risks, opportunities, and dilemmas ahead.

These ten-year forecasts will help you become more resilient to future shocks. They will help you lean into the fact that there is no “going back to normal.” They will also give you some ideas about how you might take advantage of this historic period of disruption and reinvention to change your own life, your community, or the world for the better. The next decade is likely to be the most significant opportunity most of us have in our lifetimes to really transform the way society works—and we all have a part to play in creating that positive long-term change.

THERE ARE MANY OTHER BOOKS about how to think about the future. What makes this book different? Well, I'm a professional futurist and I'm a game designer. It's not a common combination of career paths—as far as I know, I'm the only one in the world. But it's a career combination that makes a lot of sense. As both a game designer and a futurist, I see my job as transporting people to imaginary worlds, to worlds that don't exist—either because they're virtual or because they're future worlds that haven't happened yet and may never happen. My goal is to make sure that when people *leave* these imagined worlds, they feel more creative, more optimistic, and more confident in their own ability to transform those worlds, to take actions and make decisions that change the shape of that reality.

It's easy to feel powerful and creative when we play games. Every move we make, every action we take—whether in a card game, sport, board game, or video game—clearly impacts the state of the game. But when we think about the future, it's harder for most people to feel the same kind of agency. We aren't as confident that we personally can take actions or make decisions that truly help determine what happens next, especially when it comes to the bigger futures that we all share: society's future, the planet's future.

So I've tried to bring these two approaches to creating imaginary worlds—designing games and writing future forecasts—closer together. I've spent the past fifteen years as the director of game research and development at the Institute for the Future. The Institute for the Future is the world's oldest future-forecasting organization, founded in 1968, and it pioneered many of the methods that are standard practice for professional futurists today. At the institute, my job is to invent games that teach players futures-thinking habits and skills, the same kind used by researchers at the institute. I specialize in creating large-scale social simulations of the future with thousands of participants, the kind you've already read about. These simulations do more than stretch individuals' imaginations. They build actionable collective intelligence, by revealing otherwise hard-to-predict phenomena and ripple effects. As we say at the institute, "It's better to be surprised by a simulation than blindsided by reality." In fact, one way we measure the success of a simulation is by how surprising the results of the game are to experts in the field.

Over the past fifteen years at the institute, I've developed custom future forecasts, trainings, and simulations for plenty of experts and leaders—including clients at Google, IBM, Cisco, Intel, Disney, GSK, the Rockefeller Foundation, the US Department of Defense, the National Academy of Sciences, and the World Economic Forum. But my favorite kind of work is bringing futures thinking directly to the public, whether through simulations or teaching. I love watching people move from feeling anxious and insecure about the future to feeling confident, hopeful, and energized. It's why I created the How to Think Like

a Futurist workshop for Stanford University's Continuing Studies program, where it has been one of the most popular classes for the past five years—in fact, students fly in from all over the world just to take the course. It's why I created a Futures Thinking certification program with the Institute for the Future on the online learning platform Coursera, where my classes currently have over thirty thousand students. And it's why, when we launched the Coursera program—the first free, public training in futures thinking offered at scale—I coined the phrase “Foresight is a human right.”

It's my mission to give as many people as possible the skills not just to change the outcome of a game but to change the outcome of our future.

I'M EXCITED TO GO ON this journey with you. Before we begin, let me share one more thing—it's my favorite maxim of professional futures thinking:

In dealing with the future . . . it is more important to be imaginative and insightful than to be one hundred percent “right.”⁷

This bit of wisdom comes from Alvin Toffler, author of the 1970 book *Future Shock*, which kicked off professional futures thinking as we know it today. Toffler proposed the idea that society occasionally experiences a period of profound and sustained change previously so unthinkable that the people who live through it suffer a kind of “future shock.” We're disoriented. Our strategies for being happy, healthy, and successful no longer work. Old assumptions no longer hold up. And it's incredibly difficult to wrap our minds around what exactly is happening, and why. It feels like a collective trauma, the psychological equivalent of being struck by a freight train. The turbulent period of the late 1960s, when Toffler wrote this seminal text, was a time of future shock for many. The 2020s, now, even more so.

It might seem that getting ahead of the next shock by making the most accurate predictions we can about the future is our ticket out of this trauma. And yes, seeing what's coming so it doesn't blindside us *is* helpful. But there's a deeper truth to futures thinking that goes beyond just trying to be right.

Being "right" means making your best prediction and then waiting for whatever you think is most likely today to actually happen. But what if the most "likely" future isn't one you want? What if it's a catastrophe? What if it's unjust? Would you rather be correct, or would you like to prove yourself wrong—and change what's most probable today into something better?

Yes, we want to think about the future in ways that are highly plausible and likely, so our forecasts are helpful. But if we're lucky, correctly anticipating future risks and challenges will help us start solving problems creatively *today*. We can use our new foresight not just to prepare for the future but to imagine new opportunities for ourselves right now, to be innovators and change something in our lives for the better today.

Let me give you two examples, from my own experience.

I always participate in the social simulations that I run, so that I can contribute my own personal insights and get the same benefits as other participants. During the Superstruct simulation back in 2008, I was trying to figure out what I would do during a pandemic to help others. How could I use my unique skills and experience to make a difference?

I tried to think of a new way a game designer could uniquely help during a pandemic. It occurred to me that the negative stereotype of gamers as people who like to stay home alone in their basements playing video games would actually be a positive behavior during a pandemic. After all, what would public health experts be telling everyone to do if a deadly virus were spreading? "Stay home, alone!"

So I started describing a hypothetical game project that I imagined future me creating, a kind of virtual dance club where you could meet

up online and dance in front of your webcam with others, to make it easier to stay home *and* stay socially connected. I added this idea to the simulation database, which other players could search to find ideas they wanted to build on. I was soon contacted by a researcher at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), who was also participating in Superstruct, and who was intrigued by my dance game idea. She told me that in real pandemics, outbreaks are often linked to dance clubs. She suggested that epidemiologists could work with game developers during a real pandemic, to promote stay-at-home games when community spread of the virus is high. As Superstruct continued, we brainstormed how public health officials and game developers might collaborate in the future and about how doctors might prescribe games to patients to keep them home. It was a fascinating conversation, but I had no idea at the time that it would inspire me to embark on a life-changing project within a year's time.

Nine months after the simulation ended, I hit my head and suffered a concussion that turned my life upside down. My symptoms, including brain fog, excruciating headaches, vertigo, and memory problems, wouldn't go away, no matter how much I rested. I developed panic attacks, severe depression, and even suicidal thoughts that lasted for months. At my lowest point, I decided to try to make a game to help myself heal. I used everything I knew about how games could increase motivation, optimism, attention, creativity, and collaboration to design some quests and challenges that might jump-start my brain back to a more hopeful and capable state. It worked. This game, called *SuperBetter*, became the subject of a TED talk with over seven million views, a best-selling book of the same title, and an app that has helped more than a million people tackle their own health challenges. But the only reason I had the confidence to tell anyone about this deeply personal game I made for myself, let alone make an app for others to try, was the previous experience I'd had sharing ideas with that CDC researcher. Her enthusiasm about my vision of a collaboration between health professionals and game developers, and her willingness to entertain this strange idea that a doctor might prescribe a video game,

planted a seed. That seed helped me imagine that I might be taken seriously, that it was worth giving it a try.

The simulation gave me a sneak preview of the kind of real-world contribution I could make—not just in a pandemic, as it turned out, but in health crises more generally. And so when the opportunity arose, I was ready to take it. This is the gift that I want futures thinking to give to you: a chance to think more creatively and confidently *right now* about the things you could make, the solutions you could invent, the communities you could help.

I had another, bigger “aha” moment while immersing myself in an imagined future pandemic, and this one was even more personal. The first thing we asked Superstruct participants to do was to create a future profile on our social network. The profile asked ordinary questions—how old are you, where do you live, whom do you live with, what’s your occupation, what communities are you a part of? The challenge was to answer these questions for your *future* self, ten years ahead. As I filled out my future profile, I wrote something that surprised me. I wrote that I lived with my husband, Kiyash—whom I was already married to, in the present—and my seven-year-old daughter, Pepper. I could see her so vividly in my mind—a spunky, playful girl who was at the center of our adventures in the year 2019.

But at this point in 2008, when we ran the simulation, my husband and I did not have any children. We had been married for three years and weren’t in any rush to start a family. I had never pinned my hopes on becoming a mom, and we certainly hadn’t made any plans to try to get pregnant. Still, this imagined daughter in the simulation, she felt very real to me. She felt important to the life I wanted to lead. I could see her so clearly in my imagination, this person who didn’t yet exist but who felt key to the rest of the life I wanted to lead. Just by filling out this simple profile, I discovered something I truly hadn’t known about myself. To my surprise, I really did want to be a mom.

It turned out to be very important that I came to this realization when I did. It would take many years and fertility treatments and extraordinary help from others for my husband and me to start our

family. Seven years after I imagined a possible daughter, I finally became a mom to twin daughters, and it's the best thing that ever happened to me. And I don't know if we would have been able to make our family in this way if we hadn't had so much runway—so much time to make the hoped-for future real.

Clearly, neither of these personal insights prevented the COVID-19 pandemic from happening. They didn't even prevent me from catching the coronavirus—although, like a good futurist, I “got there early” and came down with it in early 2020 before anyone suspected the virus had arrived in the United States. But comparing my experience with others', I am certain I felt less anxiety than most during our long pandemic, because I felt prepared. And without a doubt, what I imagined during the Superstruct simulation changed my life and my future for the better. It gave me foresight about what I really wanted. And it gave me confidence to try to help others in a way that I'd never imagined I was capable of.

When we think about how the future might be different, we better understand how we might become different too.

That's why this book is called *Imaginable*. Yes, I want you to be able to imagine the “unthinkable” risks we need to prepare for and the “unimaginable” pain we want to avoid—so we can, in fact, prevent them or at least mitigate their harms. But I also want you to be able to imagine doing something new and exciting for the next ten years of your life, and beyond. I want you to be able to imagine yourself rising to the historic occasion of our post-pandemic, climate-crisis moment and being of service to others in a way that brings more meaning to the suffering we've all just been through. I want you to be able to imagine yourself doing and creating amazing things that would have been “unthinkable” and “unimaginable” before you had the futures-thinking tools to inspire you.

The reality is, there will always be future forces beyond our individual control. This book is not about your becoming a superhero who saves the world from the brink of disaster. Futures thinking isn't a superpower, and you don't have to fix everything or save everyone. But

futures thinking *is* an incredibly useful, practical tool to prepare your mind to adapt faster to new challenges, build hope and resilience, reduce anxiety and depression, and inspire you to take actions today that set yourself up for future happiness and success.

If we all stretch our collective imagination together, we *will* pick ourselves back up from the shock of the early 2020s faster. But not because we'll be “right” about what's next. We'll heal and recover faster because we won't be sitting around waiting for the next decade to happen to us. We'll be making the decade together.

At the start of the global COVID-19 outbreak, author and activist Arundhati Roy wrote: “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”⁸ I hope this book can serve as a portal for you: from our current world that needs to heal from a long pandemic, extreme social divisions, and the growing climate crisis, to a world where you find real new reasons to hope and feel ready for anything—even things that seem impossible to imagine today.

BEFORE WE START YOUR IMAGINATION training, I want to ask you three questions that will give you a baseline sense of your “future mindset”:

Question #1: When you think about the next ten years, do you think things will mostly *stay the same and go on as normal*? Or do you expect that most of us will dramatically rethink and reinvent how we do things? Rate your outlook on a scale of 1 to 10. 1 is almost everything stays the same, 10 is almost everything will be dramatically different.

Question #2: When you think about how the world and your life will change over the next ten years, are you *mostly worried or mostly optimistic*? Rate your outlook on a scale of 1 to 10. 1 is extremely worried, 10 is extremely optimistic.



Question #3: *How much control or influence* do you feel you personally have in determining how the world and your life change over the next ten years? Rate your outlook on a scale of 1 to 10. 1 is almost no control or influence, 10 is almost complete control or influence.

These three questions give you a good idea of the kind of imagination training we're going to do in this book. In fact, each of the three parts of the book is specifically designed to increase your score on one of these questions by at least +1.

First, we're going to focus on the opportunity for rethinking and reinventing. Why rethinking and reinventing? Well, it's easy to prepare for futures that are similar to today. It's the dramatically different stuff that catches us off guard. So it's important to spend time getting ready for the futures that will feel stranger and less familiar. Focusing on rethinking and reinventing also puts us in a better position to help decide *how* the future will be different. Having lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, each of us will know for the rest of our lives that almost anything can change virtually overnight—for worse or for better. We know that it is absolutely possible to make radical changes to how we live, work, learn, and care for each other—and to make those changes fast. This gives us a collective power of imagination unprecedented in human history. We need to use this moment strategically and creatively.

Second, I want to help you create a more balanced mindset between hopes and worries for the future. At the Institute for the Future, we call this using your *positive imagination* and your *shadow imagination*.

Positive imagination asks the question: What's something good that could happen? It builds confidence that the future will be better.

Shadow imagination asks the question: What's something bad that could happen? It builds readiness to face future challenges.

Whatever your instinctive feelings are about the future right now, you will benefit from cultivating at least a little bit of the flip-side feeling. So I'll teach you imagination techniques that help you see *both*

sides of the future: the risks that it makes sense to worry about, and the opportunities that are cause for optimism.

Just know that wherever you are right now in your outlook on the future is fine. Whether super-worried, super-optimistic, or somewhere in between, be ready to stretch your imagination in the opposite direction, so you can hold both hopes and worries in mind at the same time.

As you develop your positive and shadow imagination, you might be surprised to find that seeing risks more clearly and defining your worries more concretely can actually help you feel more hopeful. As you get better at anticipating global challenges, you'll feel more optimistic overall. There is a good reason for this paradox: you're increasing your awareness not just of what might go wrong but also of the bold plans and innovative solutions that are already being envisioned and implemented. And deep down, you know that you're putting yourself in a stronger position to help yourself and others by seriously imagining a future crisis instead of denying that it could ever happen.

Finally, we'll focus on building your confidence in how much influence you have to help determine how the future turns out. This book is about more than just anticipating the future. It's about acting to create the future you want: happier, healthier, safer, more just, more sustainable, more beautiful, more equitable. So I'll show you future-forecasting techniques that you can use to discover what contributions only *you* can make toward a better future, and how you can start making them today. And then I'll help you learn how to communicate your ideas for future change so that others are more likely to pay attention to them and feel inspired to act with you. If anything can increase your ability to influence how the future turns out, it's this: planting seeds of imagination in the minds of tens or hundreds or thousands of other people who can help you make whatever changes you're imagining.

If you add all three of these mini-mindsets up—focusing on the opportunity to rethink and reinvent, using both positive and shadow imagination, and looking for actionable ways to increase your ability

to shape the future—you get what I believe will be the biggest take-away you’ll have from training your imagination. It’s what I call *urgent optimism*.

Urgent optimism is a balanced feeling. It’s recognizing that, yes, there are great challenges and risks ahead, while also staying realistically hopeful that you have something to contribute to how we solve those challenges and face those risks. Urgent optimism means you’re not staying awake all night worrying about what might happen. Instead, you’re leaping out of bed in the morning with a fire in your pants to do something about it. Urgent optimism is knowing that you have agency and the ability to use your unique talents, skills, and life experiences to create the world you want to live in.

Make a note of your score for the three questions above. (Write your numbers in the margins or send yourself an email you can search for later.) You’ll see these questions again as we move through each of the three phases of your imagination training. At the end of the book, I’ll ask you to answer them one more time, so you can compare your scores and see for yourself just how much your skills have grown and your thinking has changed. My biggest hope for you is that reading this book will increase your overall urgent optimism score by at least +1, if not +2, +3, or more. Actually, it’s not just a hope—it’s an expectation, based on my own teaching experiences and the results of scientific research. When I teach *How to Think Like a Futurist* in the Continuing Studies program at Stanford University, I ask these same questions at the start and end of the class—and the scores consistently go up. I’ve also been able to ask nearly fifty thousand Futures Thinking learners from around the world these same questions on Coursera. And I can report that learners who complete their online training with the Institute for the Future really do anticipate more dramatic change, feel more optimistic, and have a stronger sense of agency over how their future turns out.

Perhaps even more convincingly, World Bank researchers ran a randomized controlled study of EVOKE with three hundred college students, using a new future scenario set in the year 2026. In the study,

half the students (the control group) took conventional coursework in social innovation and global challenges. The other half participated, for college credit, in a sixteen-week EVOKE social simulation, imagining what they could do to help during a future crisis involving human trafficking and people displaced from their homes by war. Compared with the students who completed conventional coursework, the EVOKE players became more optimistic that global challenges could be solved. And at the end of the simulation, they expressed more confidence that they could use their own voices and actions to bring about a better and more peaceful future.⁹

The EVOKE players also measurably improved a specific set of imagination skills, which were tested at the start and end of the sixteen-week game and evaluated by peers throughout the study. Compared with the control group, they showed a statistically significant increase in their ability to “view familiar things in a different light,” “produce original and novel ideas through the willingness to take risks and try something different,” “dream of creative ways to resolve a conflict or problem,” and “initiate forward-looking solutions.” Sounds good, right? Who wouldn’t want to get better at these things? Most importantly, their skill growth and newfound agency to influence the future were similar across genders, ethnicities, ages, and academic fields of study. This suggests that futures-thinking training and participation in social simulations can empower people from diverse backgrounds to become optimistic agents of change. And that includes you!

Turn the page, and let’s take our first trip to the future together.