

A Memory From the Future: Looking Back Through an Imaginary Time Machine

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This essay is an exercise designed to use imagination and my future hopes and goals to look into what my future autobiography might include in it. It frames the discussion in an ecological context and related to the way plants grow. It starts with a short introduction introducing the essay, and then looks at the nutrients that have helped me to grow along with the fruit that I have born.

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Being able to look back at our lives and the impacts that we have had is an important task. It is something that we should do often and as we are passing through the different stages of our lives. In the present, as I look back at my life now I can see how people and events have supported me and pushed me to grow in the way that I have grown. I find the iconic imagery of a tree that finds its place on the side of a cliff to be a compelling metaphor. Without any real amount of earth to ground itself, it finds an ability to ground itself and intertwine its roots in the area that it lands, in the hard rock. The circumstances, and supports around the budding plant are what allow it to grow and make it to maturity.

Similarly, for biologists, looking at the ecology and history of a tree that has been able to sprout up from the sheared façade of a rock might be a thought provoking endeavor. I would propose that being able to reflect back on our lives should be just as engaging. We can tell a lot about ourselves through this retrospective process. How much more encouraging could it be to imagine ourselves going through a time machine in our imagination to see our future in hindsight? To know who we are now, what our goals and aspirations are and apply them through a theoretical activity to see what we think we might say looking back. This essay is an attempt to move forward through time and imagine backward what was and how I got to where future me is. With all of that being said, within this activity, I must also state some background and caveats. I have an unyielding belief in openness. In most



Figure 1. Photo by Paiboon Sutuntivorakoon (@paiboon) on Unsplash

of my day to day task and my general viewpoint of the world, I am a planner. It feels almost therapeutic to do mind mapping, writing things down in the calendar, and task planning for me. I enjoy the activity of detailing what I need to do and organizing that information. But I am also open to the future and to the winds of change. I want to be able to flow with the direction that things go and walk through as many open doors as I can, even though I'm willing to storm the ones that are barred or blocked to me.

The Nutrients that Have Helped Me to Grow

We all take nutrients to be able to grow. A nutrient could be described as the things necessary for someone to grow or maintain. In looking back at a career, it would seem that many of the nutrients that got us to be where we are, are the people and events molded and shaped us to be who we are. For my long career, many people and events have given me

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the nutrients that allowed me to grow and blossom. I am thankful for them, both the delightful ones and the difficult ones, as I wouldn't be who I am or where I am today without them. The least I can do is acknowledge some of them here in my writing.

Throughout my life, my family has always been the greatest support for me. I want to thank my wonderful wife. She has always put up with me, supported me, and been there for me. She has been there for me in the crazy times and in fun times. We have been lucky to raise our five children to be responsible and educated adults. For each of my children, both those who are biological and those who came into my life a little bit later, have been a constant sense of wonder and addition to my life. My home has been where I have had to learn to grow and be who I am so that I can help those outside of my family. They have been my rock.

Teaching and working with students in higher education has been a significant part of my life. I feel privileged to have been granted the opportunity for so many years to get to know so many students. The transition that takes place very quickly from being a pupil to my colleague in making the world a better place, is a process that happens so fast and I am constantly impressed by the things you are all doing. One of the reasons that I love teaching is that while I might try to share some experience and skills with you, I also have learned so much from all of my students. It has caused me to think in new ways, seen other directions, and generally given me encouragement to continue.

Along with students that I have been able to work with, it has been a source of satisfaction to have been able to work with so many individuals and organizations. It is always my goal to help you find ways of reaching your goals. The access you have given to me to support you in making changes is humbling. While I have heard that the coaching and supports I have offered have been effective and useful (along with seeing the direct effects of this), I am most thankful for the opportunity to see the growth and change. It is challenging to do things differently, to be determined to not be held back by experience and challenges. There is a growth that happens corporately when we walk work collaboratively. These collaborations that we do, both improve my understanding and ability to help others while supporting you. The real work is always your responsibility, and I just get to be there to see it happen and support it how I can.

These nutrients have been more than just the people in my life, but also the events that I have been able to participate in. Very early on in my career, just after High School, I was able to learn some important strategies that have been invaluable in my life. I participated in a program called the Masters Commission where I learned the importance of service and giving to those in need. I learned that I needed to be purposeful and focused on my goals and the tasks I want to accomplish.

Pursing higher education has also brought depth to my life and work. I have learned to be systematic in the way in which I view the world. My mind has been expanded to understand that there are so many different perspectives and ways of seeing the world. I have learned discrete skills as well as new ways of thinking and considering problems. It has caused me to develop rigor in the tasks that I set out to accomplish and a more holistic approach. Going through the turmoil and rapid pace of my Ph.D. program gave me an understanding of what I can do when I set my mind to finishing a task. Just like stress testing in mechanical operations, it was a way to find out what I was made of. I'm thankful for my instructors and peers that pushed me to be better.

It has been through all of these nutrients that I have been able to set my roots down and grow. They have shaped who I am and continue to lay the foundation who I will continue to grow to be. These nutrients have allowed me to develop the capacity to bear fruit.

The Fruit I've Born

One of the primary purposes of a plant is to grow and to reproduce. To develop more of itself in the world and continue their species. One method that many plants use to accomplish this is through the development of fruit which can carry its seeds into the world. As someone who is continually interested in finding a way to leave a meaningful mark on the world once I am gone, I find this concept of reproduction fascinating. Not only do I have my children that will carry on my legacy. The changes that I have helped facilitate and the individual impacts I have made can also be carried on. In a kindred method to the spreading of those seeds, our ideas can also spread and be taken up by new generations of plants to grow all over. I hope that the ideas and systems I have shared with the world continue to be shared and spread.

Not everybody in my position can look back in their older age, and feel that they have been able to make a difference. While I am still dissatisfied with the number of changes I have been able to support, I likely will always wish I could have done more. It is that drive that is the reason I am still working even when I could retire. It is encouraging to look back at the positive impact that I have had. These impacts follow several themes throughout my life and work. But in all of them, I have desired to find sustainable results. To know that when a positive change happens, it can continue beyond my involvement. That it would grow into its own thing. I have wanted the things I have done to continue on beyond the end of my life.

Social justice hasn't necessarily been the direct focus of my work, but it has always been close to my heart. I have continued to remain involved in the community and working to support those who have the most need. Even in the systems work that I do, I find it most satisfying when I can support the systems that are supporting those with the most

significant needs. Developing a more inclusive, healthier, and sustainable future is all of our responsibilities. While we have made advancements as a society, we need to continue to champion and push forward the way that we support those with the most hardship.

My work has focused primarily around three concentric circles that flow from one end of my work to the other end. Those being my academic work, my consulting work, and my direct practice. My academic work has always been at the center of what I do. This academic focus has two parts. Firstly, I have focused on developing students to be prepared for their careers. Secondly, I have invested my time and energy into researching and determining how to combine the empirical and the experiential. There is a need to both understand the science and the art of how we can help develop resilience for individuals and for groups. In my consulting work, I get the opportunity to use the skills I learn through that research and apply it to developing and improving the resiliency of systems and the individuals within those systems. We get the opportunity to test the empirical knowledge and increase that knowledge base along with experiential aspects (consider the idea of practice wisdom). My direct practice, while more limited allows me to stay grounded in what is really being addressed through those systems and in the research. I get the opportunity to help individuals as they process and grow through the stress, trauma, adversity, and find ways to grow and strengthen our ability to respond in these circumstances. I find this direct practice to be vital in being connected to the rest of my work.

In finding ways to overcome these challenges I believe that there is importance in determining concrete next steps. The same way that a person who is blind might use a probing

cane to help guide them as they move along. It gives them the recognition of what is right in front of them. Many times as we are trying to address complex issues it is important that we have a method for determining what is all around us. We also have to have a sense of direction and understand where we are going. A kind of guiding direction. In all of the aspects of my work, I have strived to help find ways of determining what that next step is and identifying how to take it, along with a what is the overarching principles and concepts that we need to understand to actually implement it.

For a very long time, we have known that these challenges and traumas that people and organizations face are hard to deal with. Being able to understand how these stressors affect us and what muscles we need to develop to be able to respond healthily and appropriately. In hard and difficult places, with the right amount of nutrients and support, beautiful things can grow. Tupac Shakur In 1989 had a poem that seems relevant to include here:

The Rose That Grew From Concrete
Did you hear about the rose that grew
from a crack in the concrete?
Proving nature's law is wrong it
learned to walk with out having feet.
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,
it learned to breathe fresh air.
Long live the rose that grew from concrete
when no one else ever cared.

This story of a rose that grows it own feet and keeps its dreams is a strong picture of the resilience we can develop. I hope that I can continue to find more roses that can learn to walk without having their two feet.