

Introduction

You might be wondering how I can write about the future when no one knows or has ever known what it is, from the ancient soothsayers (probably reading pig entrails) to modern-day academic ‘futurolgists’ who know jack shit.

When I say ‘the future’ I don’t mean fifty or even twenty years from now. The future I’m talking about is your next breath. Even as I type this word, by the time I get to the end of the sentence (which I’m not at yet) that’s the future. Okay, I’m at the end of the sentence, but now the future moved ahead again. You can never catch up with it, that’s the only thing guaranteed – it’s always in front somewhere.

My Story

So why am I writing about the future when no one really knows what’s going to happen next? I was hugely disappointed when it turned out my favourite show as a child, *The Jetsons*, based on what I thought was an accurate depiction of 2010, didn’t pan out. Not one thing came true: no flying cars, no robotic maids, no nothing. So I’m very cynical about futurists saying they know anything. You know where it started? It started with those old Greek soothsayers reading goat entrails. If they were legit, why didn’t they know their empire was going to go kaput in a few years? And while I’m on it, why, these days, do people

who claim to be psychics not clean up in Vegas? So I'm not claiming to know the future either, but I'm going to be honest with you: I decided to write on this subject because the most popular and best-selling books are about the future and I don't mind being there either.

Back to the Future

Here's the thing, you can run but you can't hide; the future is going to happen whether we like it or not, but the trick is how we handle it. Most of us don't have the courage to investigate because we're frightened to imagine change but we may as well cut ourselves some slack and be kind to ourselves. We need to accept that everything changes or we'll end up as old bores, harping on about how things used to be. We will become irrelevant, which is (alongside being unfriended on Facebook) the most frightening fate of them all.

I am aware that each of us has a different agenda: some people are just worrying about where to find food for their next meal, others are trying to cross the sea in a boat to freedom. It's only those who have the luxury of having enough to eat and know where they're sleeping tonight who can start to worry about the fact polar bears only have a few ice cubes to cling on to or that dolphins are ending up in nets.

Why the Bad News?

Why is there so much written about what's wrong with the world? I had to really hunt for positive sound bites even though they should be on the front cover of every newspaper every day of the week to replace the usual photo of a

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beautiful woman who is either at her film premiere or dead. Americans are addicted to the rage the guy that's President provokes (I won't speak his name because it will just make you angry), which is exactly why he's in power because when we're in a fury for a long time, we begin to think like savages. He knows how to trigger this rage and then stoke it up until we're baying for the blood of some imagined enemy. I think the more we rant, the more powerful he becomes. Every joke a comedian makes about the "T" person gets another vote in Arkansas because they hate those white liberals and Mr T promises to help these powerless poor people. Let us not forget that this is an old technique; the moustached Mr H used it for stoking fear and look what happened next.

It's part of the human condition that we only wake up when things are frightening (see my last book); fear is what captures our attention. You might not remember your kid's first words as clearly as you do 9/11. (Those images of the collapsing towers are tattooed on our brains forever.)

We seem to be addicted to fear, getting a high on that heart-clenching, teeth-grinding, high-octane rush of terror, and when it subsides, we unconsciously look for a higher hit.

The trouble is that the fear starts inside of us and, like lighting a touch paper, spreads to everyone we know. Then people who were friends and neighbours suddenly start to blame each other for their dissatisfaction, and once they identify an enemy, *BOOM*, you have a war and a genocide sandwich to go with it. (Thank you, Mr H, for showing us how.) What frightens you then? Refugees? Ebola? China? Cyborgs? Marks & Spencer closing down? What's your poison?

A History of Self-help Books

Prehistoric Self-help

As far as we know, based on early fossil findings, there were only imprints of crustaceans; no self-help books.

1950s

At this point, self-help was targeted at women so they'd get better at being women. They were told if they wanted to please their man (and that's all most of them did for a living in those days), they needed to have a bright smile and bake him an apple pie. Wifey should greet him every night with a Martini when he came through the front door with his usual mating cry, 'Hi, honey, I'm home.' In order to pull off this happy-go-lucky domestic bliss, magazines gave you hot tips on how to be the 'hostess with the mostest' and where to score some Valium.

1960s

Now it was all about women learning to be stewardesses in the bedroom and whores in the kitchen (I may have got that wrong).

1970s

For both women and men now, the instruction was given from on high that you needed to find the real you: your inner child, your chakras, your vortex and your id. For ten long years, we searched deep inside ourselves. Some never came out; others, on high doses of LSD, leapt from rooftops thinking they were birds.

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1980s

A decade where we learnt that women and men are from different planets (Venus and Mars specifically). The idea being most men are pigs and women are sheep and never the twain shall meet.

2000

That's when we went from the mind to the mouth – organic cookbooks and how to stay healthy became the 'in thing'. Yoga became mainstream and gurus in nappies made up postures involving unattainable positions like being able to give yourself an internal gynaecological exam, while doing a downward dog. Nutritionists told us to only eat turf.

2005

Spirituality became the mainstream and we were told the importance of now . . . no, now . . . no, you missed it . . . try again . . . now . . . still not now. NOW! Being in the present was de rigueur; this meant a lot of people froze to death for not acknowledging winter was coming and neglecting to get some warm clothes.

2019

Books about (you know what's coming) the future and why we should be scared shitless became number one. They were filled with words you've never met before which I will define:

- **Crispr** which I think is where you splice some genes to grow smarter kids in a petri dish

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- **Blockchain** and **cybercoin** (no idea)
- **Singularity** where you wake up one morning and you're an app
- **Open sourcing** means everyone can steal your ideas
- **Robotics** they will crack the human code, suck out our brains and take over the world, leaving us as mere ashtrays

My last book, *How To Be Human*, was an instruction manual – a guide to who we are, which is a result of our evolutionary past, genes, hormones, neuronal connections, experiences, parental imprints, star signs and chakras (I threw those last two in to widen my readership). We are not our fault. The influence these have on us is below our conscious awareness, meaning shit happens and we're the last to know. So how do we take the wheel from our overworked, overstressed, overcritical minds and swerve ourselves over to a happier highway? We have to drastically change our old navigation systems that drive us to despair, to a more positive destination. If we don't, we'll forever be breaking down. There is no AA service coming to help us. It's up to us.

We need to learn to pull over and calmly look inside the bonnet (I mean our minds for those of you who don't get metaphors).

If we could treat ourselves with more compassion, realizing that our glitches are not *our* condition, but the human condition, we just might be able to change ourselves for the better and that would ripple out to the world. I've said it before: we work like neural Wi-Fi. We have the equipment in our brains to make some internal adjustments, train our brains to be kind, not cruel, and if we do, the future is bright. If someone hurts me, I want to hurt them back. If I envy someone, I want to steal what they've got. But on the

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optimistic side, if someone cares about me, I'll care right back. That's how we roll as individuals and as a society. I'm picturing us as a long line of dominoes and the first in the queue knocks over the next, each sending the message of empathy and compassion.

Good News

At this time things are better than at any point in history unless you believe in Camelot.

Life expectancy, they point out, has risen more steeply in the past fifty years than the previous thousand: a child born in 2016 stands a fairly good chance of seeing the arrival of the twenty-second century.

In the last couple of hundred years, from a world that was almost completely illiterate, 84 per cent of adults have learnt to read.

In 1981, almost half the people in the developing world lived below the poverty line; as of 2012, that figure had dropped to 12.7 per cent.

And most surprising of all . . . The last decade was the most peaceful in the history of the world. Yes, it turns out that being around in the Spanish Inquisition was slightly more stressful than Brexit. At least you're not going to end up with a spike through your head . . . yet.

What I Do Know

From the research I did for my last book, I think I have more of an understanding of why we think, act and feel the way we do. I've studied my own mind as a microcosm of the human condition and put it under a microscope to observe my inner monologues. Let me tell you, it's a shit show of

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regrets, incrimination, revenge, envy . . . But by practising mindfulness, I've learnt, it's better to be aware of what's going on in your mind. If you aren't, you'll project your poison on to other people and then blame them for your own flaws. What we think to ourselves is how we treat other people, but knowing that we all have similar thoughts running through our minds (same recordings, different lyrics) has made me far more tolerant of people because we all have the same surround-sound, just with slightly different themes and in a variety of languages. 'I'm an asshole' packs the same punch in Spanish as in Mandarin.

There should be an app where people admit what's really going on in their lives; 140 characters on our low self-esteem. It could be called 'Shitter' instead of Twitter. You'd probably become incredibly popular and get millions of followers because the rest of the world would identify. Let's all agree that the happier people look on Instagram photos, the more miserable they probably are inside. You can often equate smile size with levels of internal mayhem. And these days it's not throwing spears or missiles, it's trolling that's our modern-day weapon of mass destruction.

Compassion

On rereading my last book – something I rarely do because I immediately start doing corrections in spite of the fact that it's too late, the book's already been published – anyway, since then, I've realized that maybe in some areas I came to the wrong conclusions. (Very few authors will admit they were wrong; I think it shows humility and a youthfully flexible mind.) Instead of my theory that we're born vicious with a 'dog-eat-dog' mindset (though personally I've never seen a dog eat a dog), I've come to the conclusion that we're born

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with a more compassionate nature; we've all got this thing called compassion dust, it's just that some of us don't know how to sprinkle it.

I used to call it the 'C' word; I was very queasy saying the word 'compassion' (see, now I can say it) but recently I've discovered it's the most crucial thing to have if we want a good life. You can read as many books as you like on how to be a big-deal, powerful leader who commands his team like a general but power will never give you that warm, wind-chimey feeling of calm. You may get a yacht, a private jet and partner with no wrinkles, but you'll be unable to feel real joy.

Here's the Hope of the Future

Do you think it's possible we would fare better in the future if we were kinder to ourselves and everyone else around us? Would that bring in the good news? We're experts at revelling in the bad stuff, but now we'll have to focus more on compassion to improve ourselves as humans. Paul Gilbert, creator of mindfulness-based compassion therapy, says, 'Developing compassion is like playing a musical instrument – it's a skill that can be enhanced with dedicated practice.'

Nothing will change until we change the lens through which we see the world. As Albert Einstein said, 'We can't solve the problems we face with the same thinking we used to create them.' My mission in writing this book is to find out where the green shoots of hope are and who is tending them.

It turns out there is a new world view waiting in the wings to replace the old one. The examples I give in this book of inspiring innovations and innovators in education, tech,

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business, community and food will make you more hopeful about what's on the horizon.

I'm also hoping the experiences I'll have, places I'll go and people I'll meet will inspire me to change my life in some way. I'm beginning to realize that, unconsciously, I clearly wanted to make a change and writing this book was partly an excuse for me to discover what that is.

By the end, will I be enlightened? More compassionate? More confused? The same as I am now? I just cross my fingers I don't go AWOL, give away all my money, go off-grid and live with gorillas.

You might not be surprised to learn that the first chapter is about building community as an antidote to loneliness. If our natural state is working together and caring for each other, we need to find community and rethink how we can live together to treat one another with care and respect. Enough with the intro, let's move on.

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Community

The biggest cause of suffering these days is not, as some of you might think, panicking about finishing your 10,000 steps because some wristband barks at you to keep going, even after collapsing. (I always wonder how many people die of strokes because they only did 9,999, lying there on the ground, their little legs still kicking to finish that last step before they croak.) No, the biggest cause of emotional pain in the Western world is loneliness. This feeling of isolation is the main cause of the decline in mental health, which has a direct impact on physical health. It's like your body is a pin-ball machine: once the ball of stress shoots out from the flippers, it takes out your immune system and then you're a welcome mat for the diseases that can kill you. Loneliness is not just some lightweight Elvis song that twangs the heart-ache of being left out, it is activated in the same part of the brain as physical injury; being side-swiped on Tinder hurts as much as snapping your femur. It probably feels worse, because with a broken leg you might think, 'I'm such a klutz,' which is far kinder than thinking, 'I'm a loser, everybody hates me.' Research now shows that people who are isolated, on average, have shorter lifespans than those who have a solid social network. The sense of isolation is so agonizing that they say prisoners prefer to have violence inflicted on them over being sent to solitary confinement. So

even though we think we want privacy, what we really need is other people.

Why Are We So Lonely?

We are the first species in two million years to disband its own tribes. Families disperse, neighbours hardly know each other and, even though we're supposed to be the smartest beings on earth, we've lost the plot; we've lost the point of us and it turns out that the point of us is to mingle.*

Robin Dunbar, the evolutionary psychologist, points out that if you are an influencer you could potentially have 5 million friends but still may be the loneliest person of all, having to paint on your own reflection day and night in order to convince the rest of the world you matter. I saw a documentary where a terrified Paris Hilton jack-knifed up from bed each morning, clawing for her phone like it was a syringe of meth to see if she'd lost any of her 50 million followers while she was sleeping. She was convinced she had such a close affinity to them all. Throughout her day, she watched her ratings like a trader watches his stocks, her self-esteem zigzagging from narcissistic rapture to thoughts of suicide.

Luckily, most of us on the planet still know what it feels like to have a close friend. We 'feel seen' in their presence and they see us in all our heiniosity and they still love us. (I made that word up for anyone trying to look it up.) This feeling of 'being seen' is now mistaken for being seen on a screen and that is not what I'm talking about. You can only 'feel seen' in the flesh because it's not your looks that evoke emotions (except for the very shallow), it's the vibe two people create together, or to be more scientific, it's the hormones

* Now, as I reread this in lockdown, that seems so poignant.

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you both spurt at each other. When someone makes us feel good and safe, we manufacture oxytocin in our brain and this in turn switches on the mechanism in their brain to brew up their own stash of oxytocin – so now you're getting high together. If we feel good, people will like us, and the more people like us, the better we feel. Nature really knows how to make a win-win situation work. The oxytocin doesn't just induce feelings of pleasure, it stimulates empathy and compassion, which are also contagious, and so we infect each other with kindness and that is when the human race is at its finest.

Conversely, when someone doesn't like me, I can sometimes smell it. In the past, if I picked up that whiff of a sneer, I'd turn myself inside out to get their approval, attempting to be hilarious, which always backfires because they can smell your desperation too. Nowadays, though, if the hate-smell is strong, I just retreat because I have learnt that how someone sees you is really none of your business; it's the film they're playing of you, nothing to do with you, so move away from the building.

Connection From Birth

You can run, you can hide, but it's in your DNA to connect. Henry Thoreau was one in a million in being able to live alone on Walden Pond out in the woods for years; the other 999,999 people who attempt it would go nuts in all that isolation and end up gnawing their own legs off.

It's perfectly simple, we all want to be happy so we hunt for others who can press our 'happy button'; this is why comedians have jobs. When they make someone laugh, they're only really switching on their audiences' endorphins and, even better, charging money for doing it. They make

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them pay for something the listeners are manufacturing in their own brain; comedians are just fluffers, turning on everyone's happy juices. And that feeling of shared exhilaration spreads like wildfire through the room. The bursting feeling of bonding happens when people understand the same joke. Then they feel connected, stress levels lower and the oxytocin flows, making them feel like they're all tucked up safe and sound, sucking their collective thumb. When we laugh together, it implicitly means we see the world the same way and that's when we go into bond mode. Words and actions can be misinterpreted, but laughter signals pure unadulterated mutual recognition. Cows moo to find each other, sheep bah, horses neigh. Humans laugh. This is how we recognize our tribe. (Boohoo is also a globally identifiable noise but it's not so much fun and people don't like you for passing it on to them.)

My Story

I remember once going to a Born Again Evangelical meeting. (I wish I believed in Jesus, so many of my problems would be solved.) You go into those churches and everyone's clapping and singing unashamedly, heads thrown back, uvulas flapping. You can and are encouraged to hug your neighbour without being hash-tagged as a pervert. You actually have to 'love thy neighbour' because those are the rules. Nobody minded there that Jesus and I weren't on first-name terms. God bless him, the priest took my hand and led me to the front, put his hand on my head and threw me into the arms of two 'brothers', while whispering in my ear how to talk in tongues. (Basically, you foam a lot while blithering.) I'm telling you, I felt wrapped in a