

Looking Ahead: An Interview With Adam Kahane

Adam Kahane is best known for his work around scenario-planning, which he first used to help bring about a resolution in post-apartheid South Africa in the 1990s. Now a partner in Reos Partners, an international social innovation firm, and an associate fellow at the University of Oxford, he uses scenario planning to assist governments, global organizations, and private corporations deal with problems. Here, he talks to Solutions from his home in Cape Town, South Africa.

In your new book *Transformative Scenario Planning: Working Together to Change the Future* (Berrett-Koehler, 2012), you describe a new approach to scenario planning that helps actors “transform a system.” Tell us how this advances your past work on scenario planning?

This idea that there might be another way to work on tough problems came to me 20 years ago when I came to South Africa in 1991 to facilitate a scenario-exercise methodology I was using in Shell Oil in London. What I discovered was that the people I was working with were not experts or academics, but were a team of leaders from across the society, including opposition and establishment trade unions, politicians, academics, community leaders, black and white, left and right.

I first had a glimpse of the possibility that, if people from across the system who share a concern that change is needed can come together and work together, then it's possible to make change in an otherwise impossible situation, and I worked on a whole methodology for doing this.

Transformative scenario planning involves constructing scenarios of what could happen—not envisioning what *should* happen, but what *could* happen—as a way to deal with problematic situations that couldn't be approached directly in order to adapt to different outcomes. Adaptive scenario planning is widely used in business and government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and it was by accident that I got involved in using that methodology in South Africa with people who I later realized were not trying to adapt, but to influence. Twenty years later, we're now calling it transformative not adaptive.

The president of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, gives your book quite an endorsement, crediting you with helping to change the direction of Colombia. Can you summarize how this happened?

I started doing this in South Africa in 1991–92 and moved there in '93, and have been working with colleagues literally all over the world on every issue and continent. One of the early projects was in Colombia, which is a remarkable country—energetic, creative, and entrepreneurial—but has also had a terrible and complicated history of violence that goes back decades and continues now, involving drug trafficking and military and gangs and government. This project, Destination Colombia, brought together an amazing group of leaders in 1996—cabinet ministers, guerrilla leaders, NGO people, church leaders, young people and business people—to have what still may be the most in-depth and open conversation among those groups about what is really going on here and



Móric van der Meer

what is possible. The person who is now the president of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, was one of the organizers. He has a story about the way the scenarios, over the 16 years since then, allowed Colombia to deal with this issue and become a safer and wealthier and less violent and unequal place. When I saw him in Bogota a year ago, for the event at which he made this statement, I suggested the same methodology could be used to look at the problem of drugs in South, Central, and North America, which is causing huge suffering with 60,000 deaths in Mexico. He liked that idea and proposed it. I'm spending a lot of my time on it now—scenarios of addressing problems of drugs in South America with all the presidents of the region. The Organization of American States was given the mandate and we are working with them and the scenarios will be realized in June with the intention of opening up and deepening the debate about what to do with the drug issue.

Is the United States on board?

Yes. Heads of government of 34 different countries are involved.

Can you scale up scenario planning to address global problems, such as climate change, global governance, poverty, etc.?

Yes, it is simple, but not easy. The drug problem we're addressing is an international and intergovernmental activity, so all the issues you have in trying to do work across international jurisdictions are present. So, in principal, the same approach would work globally but the challenges are obvious and insurmountable.

There are very weak structures for thinking and acting globally, and national sovereignty and interests tend to trump international work. I've worked a lot for many years on the archetype of this sort of problem,

So shifting from what *should* to what *could* enables a more open kind of work. That's the trick.

Are you familiar with the Great Transition Initiative—an international network of scholars and experts, led by the Tellus Institute, which advocates for a healthy planet and an enriched life. Is this a good example of scenario planning at the global scale?

Yes, I am familiar with it from four to five years ago. It uses scenarios of what's possible and envisions what's possible. However, it is led by groups of advocates and experts. While that can be good and useful, that's different from having such work constructed by actors across the system. That was the breakthrough in South Africa. It wasn't the scenarios, which people could sketch out on a napkin, but that they were developed and owned and under-

What's the role of the media in resolving (or enhancing) conflict? What can be improved?

The stories we tell ourselves about what's happening and what's possible and why things are happening and what's going on and who is doing what are all important. The most basic thing about this work is that stories matter, and the media is the main conduit for stories and the disseminator. The way we think about things matters enormously. And so if we want to change the stories we're telling, then the media has an enormous role in framing and reporting and provoking dialogue. It does need to be improved. The stories we now tell ourselves are extremely unhelpful to our understanding and for our making progress on these complex issues. The reason I work on telling different stories is because the stories many of us tell aren't useful or working or helping us. In the scenario process, the media's participation supporting and provoking has been critical.

What is your personal vision for a sustainable and desirable future?

Peter Sange once described me as a practical craftsman, so I tend, by disposition, to focus on my craft, on this work I do. My vision is that human systems have the capacity to make progress on their problems peacefully rather than violently, and that we learn to work through the complex challenges we face reactively rather than through force. That's the work I'm doing and how I see my contribution and I think that's important. Our problems get stuck, or we attempt to solve them violently, with physical violence, with guns or money or votes. In a way, it doesn't matter. My vision is

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climate change, and we all know how slow that progress has been, and the solutions have been inadequate to the scale of the problem. But, yes, as a way to step back and ask the question, what could happen here? and have that question asked and debated among experts and political actors and a broader group. This very simple shift in vocabulary of talking about what's possible opens up a different conversation than the normal one of what should happen.

stood and seen as useful by leaders from across a system that is polarized. So I place a central emphasis not only on the solution but also on who constructs it. So with the drug situation, it's not only that we're looking at what is possible but that it's done by drug czars and police chiefs and treatment center directors and business people from across the continent. That's different from a think tank's producing scenarios and then trying to get others to use and understand them.

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not to do away with problems, as we'll always have problems, breakdowns, and failures. But what's our capacity to deal with them? And how can we deal with them in a way that's just, peaceful, and creative and not unilateral and violent.

But isn't it an unavoidable fact of life that political leaders will pursue their own interests even at the expense of the greater good? Isn't the Iraq war a perfect example of that?

My previous book *Power and Love* says that everyone is always pursuing their own interests. Martin Luther King said, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic." The notion that

The Iraqis, both Sunni and Shia, also had stories about themselves that the United States didn't understand.

There are lots of funny stories. I'm Canadian and, as a foreigner, the American story about the shining city on the hill and the destiny of America being to sort everyone else out, to show the way for everyone else, strikes me as quite odd and unhelpful, and self-deceiving. So there are lots of stories people tell over long histories and they are deep and they can't be questioned, and they are a major constraint on our ability to solve problems, and that's what this tool of transformative scenario planning is about, how we talk about and think about things. You can say,

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we all just need to think of the greater good is an entirely misconstrued approach, and that's what King meant. Thinking of common, and not separate, interests is sentimental and anemic at best. So it wasn't surprising that people pursued their own interests. What surprised me about Iraq was that they would make the calculation that their interests would be better served with a war. And their various attempts at negotiation at the United Nations and with Saddam Hussein would fail.

"What a waste of time. Why don't you do something?" But the stories we tell about who we are and what's happened to us, and what we need matter more than anything else. If you can change those, then you can change everything else.

How does this pertain to the effort to influence global climate change?

As many have said, the stories we tell ourselves about our relationship to Mother Earth are of central

importance and it has been a big surprise to me, over many years of working and being connected one way or another to climate change work, how difficult it has been to change that story.

What is the story and how is it unhelpful?

The dominant story in modern societies has been that our well-being is our own doing and doesn't depend much on the health of the earth, and so we can continue to pollute and extract and fish and degrade soils and put carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and it will be OK. That's the story people tell themselves. The environment is an infinite sink for waste. It's a story that will destroy us, literally. Many people have been telling a new story for decades in many sophisticated ways. Lots of people know it, and yet the cumulative actions we take ignore that new story. It's probably the most dangerous example of using a story that doesn't work and will, in fact, kill us all.

My point is that the new story has been told and it hasn't penetrated to the point of action. And this surprises me and it shows that the belief systems attached to the old story are very deep and, if getting people to believe a new story is insufficient, I guess what I'm saying is that the hearing of a new story and understanding it intellectually is by itself not enough. Apparently.

So, we have to think about what to do about that.

Yes, that's the assignment. **S**