

# Turning uncertainty into opportunity: a new way to use-the-future

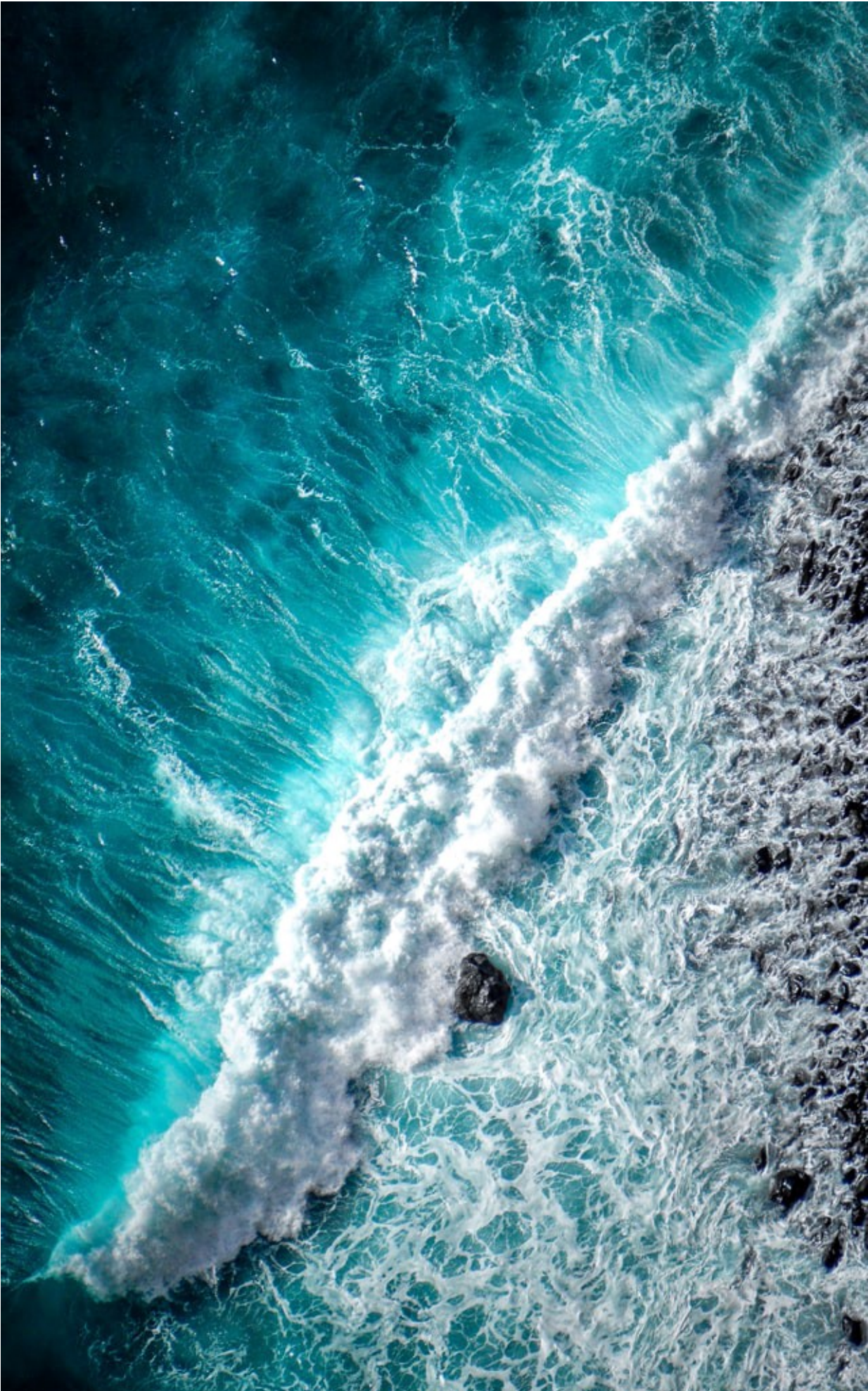


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Following

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## Comfort in certainty?

In a world obsessed with forecasting and control, where the unknown unknowns inherent in complexity are considered anathema, the future is often reduced to perpetuating the already known and modeled, the already established, the path-dependent, and the existing structure. This is understandable. It is, after all, human nature to find comfort in certainty.

To achieve this semblance of control, we all use the future all the time. Along with business-as-usual anticipation, more “surprising” futures are widely popularized in the media — often dystopic, as extravagantly depicted in so many Hollywood scenarios — so we think we know what they look and feel like. Yet with all their special effects, these are often little more than extrapolations of the present and indirect attempts to control the future. This leads to an in-bred poverty of imagination in our relationship with the future and puts us at odds with the constantly emerging creativity of the universe. After all, if 2020 has taught us anything, it is that the future (really!) rarely unfolds as expected.

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Thus, rather than forecasting and planning for a limited set of possible scenarios and retrofitting our solutions to them, why not take a different approach: turn uncertainty and complexity — all too often considered as a risk to be mitigated and liabilities to be accounted for — into assets and opportunities that enable innovation, leadership, discovery, choice, knowledge, and more.

But how?

## A new way of coping with uncertainty

One way is to practice Futures Literacy — a skill that, once acquired, can improve the way in which we use our innate ability to anticipate, and can have a profound impact on what we see and what we do in the present ([for more information on Futures Literacy](#)). Futures literacy’s design principles, in conjunction with the use of our imagination, experimentation, and an open mind, reveal our diverse hopes and fears for the future, and open the door to confront and nurture them in novel ways — through dialogue and experimentation.



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For, as has become painfully apparent in so many ways — from the current pandemic shock and climate crisis, to rising inequality and mass migrations, or the perpetual acceleration of business cycles — our current methods of coping with uncertainty and planning for the future tend to break down in the face of growing complexity and uncertainty. We have reached a tipping point whereby the underlying and innate complexity of our biome can no longer be simplified to fit our pre-existing patterns and models. It is our “mechanistic” assumptions of control that may have become the greatest liability, not uncertainty. And in the face of this systemic shift in complexity, it becomes vital — in the literal sense — that we regain our childlike creativity and our ability to imagine truly new futures. And thrive when we face them.

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However, if we are to combat this poverty of imagination, we need tools that allow us to somehow step outside of ourselves and learn how to use the future to expand our field of possibilities — both as social and rational beings. In order to achieve this shift, we need to better understand

- the way we think, our so-called mental structures and heuristics,
- as well our perspective as social animals.

## Shifting our way of thinking

Discussion and inquiries about the future tend to be normative in their very nature. It is therefore empowering to recognize that the future is not predetermined. It cannot be predicted. Yet, we can have an impact on it. Futures literacy is the capacity that contributes to empowering us by allowing us to assess critically our own anticipatory assumptions and expectations about the future — and by extension, about the present. By first recognizing and then analyzing our immediate narratives about the future, we are able to then think of new avenues for the future to realize, and thereby both shape the way it unfolds and surf the waves of emergence in the present.

The difficulty lies in the fact that shifting our way of thinking and perspective implies challenging the very mechanisms that underpin our survival instincts: our gregarious instinct as a species, on the one hand, and our mental heuristics or, so-called fast thinking brain, on the other.

These two mechanisms are related and self-reinforcing. The first allows us to effortlessly navigate the complexity of social interactions, while the second filters the otherwise overwhelming mass of external stimuli we are subjected to as sentient beings. Thanks to these parallel and complementary survival mechanisms, we have become extraordinary anticipation and pattern-recognition machines.



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Both of these mechanisms are essential to our survival and allow us to function “seamlessly” in what would otherwise be an unbearably complex environment.

But they also have a dark side.

They are at the root of our inability to truly use-the-future in a novel and creative way. As gregarious, safety-seeking creatures, we still mostly just want to fit in. And instinctively, we latch onto the common wisdom, the tried and true, the socially expected and acceptable. Seriously limiting our ability to imagine, let alone enact, any kind of truly creative social or organizational innovation.

And this instinct to conform naturally builds on our fast-thinking survival heuristic, which establishes our existing patterns of behavior as the default. After all, from an evolutionary perspective as a species, what allowed us to survive yesterday will most likely keep us alive tomorrow.

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It appears then that the mechanisms that have allowed us to thrive and evolve as a species are also instrumental in our natural tendency to colonize the future. In fact, they have become the primary causes of our in-born imagination deficiency and our inability to also envision futures that are free from the experience of the past. As social and rational creatures, part of growing up and becoming a “functional” adult implies replacing imagination and creativity with “experience”, which ultimately is little more than the repetition of successful patterns of the past. In this light, it comes as little surprise that according to some anthropologists only 4% of adults retain their childlike creativity (see the work of Emmanuelle Joseph Dailly).

And lurking beneath these parallel and self-reinforcing mechanisms is our deep-seated need to anticipate and control which has been genetically hard-wired into us as a very effective method of survival.



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## **An antidote to our poverty of imagination**

The turning point of today is that in the face of our ever greater and more direct entanglement with and in our ecosystem, the desire for control may have become counterproductive — and maybe even dangerous. Instead, we need to re-wire ourselves to be open for uncertainty and simultaneously imagine for alternative, decolonized, diverse futures. This should become the new survival mode.

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It is time we reconnected with our ability to use-the-future in a creative and non-prescriptive way. Futures Literacy is an antidote to our poverty of the imagination and the despair induced by an inability to sense the potential of the present. By enhancing the power of the human imagination, Futures Literacy makes it easier to take advantage of a world where the only certainty is uncertainty and change is the only constant. Understanding better how to ‘use-the-future’ enables us to turn novelty and surprise into a resource that helps us to detect and invent meaningful experiments that constructively express local history and context — and nurture the emergent.

A Futures Literate individual or organization incorporates the critical notion of emergence, which is too often overlooked in the context of strategic planning. From an organizational perspective, this provides the lens and the opportunity to integrate

emergence through an experimental, cyclical approach to confronting challenges. As a complementary skill to existing foresight practices, Futures Literacy therefore unlocks innovation in its truest form. In other words, taking a holistic approach to using-the-future empowers creativity, a shift in perspective, a shift in time horizon, and ultimately, the development of agency both at the individual and organizational levels.

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The empowering nature of Futures Literacy is revealed when hegemonic narratives of the future are challenged and recreated. This is vital for a tomorrow that celebrates equality and diversity, i.e. decolonizing the future. Futures Literacy helps us challenge path dependencies not only for societal change, but also in reimagining businesses and policies. This shift from bounded uncertainty to unbounded uncertainty requires accepting, experimenting and embracing the unfettered emergence of the universe as a crucial component for long-term, sustainable business and policy-making.



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Over the past year, our consortium of leading universities and research centers in futures studies funded by EIT Climate KIC has developed a new model to contribute to Futures Literacy Z Sustainability S Leadership C Innovation I Adaptation embracing uncertainty as an opportunity, rather than a risk.

We believe that the capacity to use the future to help us overcome this imagination deficiency is essential if we are to help society, organizations and individuals shift their perspective from short term gain to long-term sustainability — or in more mundane terms, our collective ability to make potentially difficult choices today that will likely mostly benefit generations ahead.

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