

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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There is a little monument in Kapi'olani Park that was placed there at the 100th anniversary, 1976, I think, that's supposed to be opened a hundred years later. I have something written in there which assumes it will be under water. Now, this is 1976, I'm saying that the park's gonna be under water. I did television programs uh, that were used in the schools that talked about Waikīkī being under water. I live in Waikīkī; I'm concerned about that. We're still debating it.

He offers educated forecasts of what the future may hold for the coming decades. Jim Dator, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. What does the future hold? It's a question that we ask ourselves from time to time. Jim Dator of Waikīkī has spent the last fifty years pondering and researching this very question. Dr. Dator is professor emeritus and the director of the Hawaii Research Center for Future Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. As a futurist, he studies a multitude of trends, ranging from social and environmental conditions to technology, and then develops forecasts, or alternative futures, for the next few decades and beyond. He's a pioneer in this academic field, and is an internationally respected voice in future studies. While there are misconceptions about what futurists do, the field of future studies continues to grow, and has gained traction worldwide.

I think some people confuse futurists with psychics. You get some jokes about: Why didn't you predict this, Dr. Dator?

Yes. That's right. I used to have a statement: When all else fails, call a futurist. But they call a futurist, and they want that futurist to predict the future, or to tell them what to do. And there are futurists that do that; there are people that call themselves futurists that do that. And they give a bad name to those of us that understand you can't allow people to think that you know what the future is. So, we have a code of ethics to make sure that we can't predict what the future will be; we will engage you in a process of considering alternative futures, and you then decide to move in a certain direction. It is more of a social science than it is of a natural science, but it is theoretically based. That

is to say, there are understandings the way the world works that allows you to make statements about forecast. So, I distinguish between predicting the future, and forecasting alternative futures. And we still want to be able to be precise in the old scientific reductionist way.

When you're familiarizing people with your alternative futures or future alternatives, it must sound pretty bizarre sometimes.

Well, yes. Again, Dator's second law of the future is, in a situation, in an environment of rapid social and environmental change. In that environment, any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous. Because the things are changing, and things that are going to be important in the future are not things you've experienced before. So, to be a futurist, you have to not only understand the trends from the past, but continue into the future of what are called emerging issues, new ideas, new technologies, new lifestyles, and you look for them just as they're just popping out underground. So, you don't make it up, you see what could be a mighty oak if it grows in a certain way, or a cactus if it grows in a different way. And therefore, you have to identify emerging issues, things that are not part of the past or the present, but which might be part of the future, and build scenarios around both the past and the emerging issues.

That's right; you can't rely on the same assumptions. You don't even know if there are any assumptions you can make in some areas.

That's true. But we don't throw it all away. We do have categories; assume the categories will continue, at least for our foreseeable future. But the content of those categories—so transportation, for example, has changed and might change. Communication has changed tremendously over time.

As a futurist, Jim Dator studies the past and present to make forecasts about the future. As he was growing up, he liked the idea of looking forward, rather than backward, because he and his family experienced many difficulties, starting with the death of his father even before Jim got to know him.

My mother did not intend to get pregnant. She was anticipating a life as a musician or at least somehow related to music. She was a student at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. She got pregnant, they got married, and I was born. That was all fine, except my father drowned.

While you were still a baby?

I'm just about sixteen or eighteen months old. Anyway, she had to come back to Florida, which is where she was originally from. And we're talking about 1933, 1934,

which is the very depth of the Depression. And so, my grandfather was the town undertaker.

This is her father?

Yes; that's her father. And was the town undertaker in a little town called DeLand, Florida. His father had been one of the pioneers that had come and settled that part of Florida. They were sort of fixtures in the town, having a furniture store and a funeral parlor, making coffins from the furniture store.

Well, that seems to bode well for the child who now has additional family.

Well, people die, but they don't have money to pay for it. So, he had the job of burying people, but not necessarily being paid, or not necessarily being paid in cash, but in kind. So, we would get pieces of furniture or silverware, or other things like that. Times were very, very tough. And for me to show up, unwanted, and for his daughter, oldest daughter to return instead of going off to seek her fortune as he imagined.

It's two more mouths to feed.

Yeah. That's right, two more mouths to feed. And one of them a squalling brat, you know.

More tragedy struck Jim Dator's family in DeLand, Florida during his youth. Within a period of two years, all of the adult males in the family, including his great-grandfather, grandfather, and uncle, passed away suddenly.

Dying was not only the family profession in terms of the undertaker, but all the males in the family died all at once, leaving me as the only male with three females. My grandmother, my mother, her sister—my aunt, were my family during the time I was young.

And what was your life like? Was it a happy childhood?

No; it was not unhappy in the sense that I was well taken care of. But no one felt really happy, and they didn't show. So, I don't ever recall being hugged and kissed, and being told I was a good boy, or anything like that.

Even when you were a young child?

No.

No?

I might have been, but that's not the memory I have. And I don't recall feeling depressed. That's just the way it was.

Well, you don't know what's normal, I suppose.

No.

But you must have been a good student.

Well, but that was expected. I was expected to succeed. So, the things I did were never praised. That was just what Jimmy did. I had to overcome that, and to learn to love other people, and to love people who could love me back. And so, I was sort of a driven kid. I was extremely popular in terms of elections to things at various stages, but I never was a person that hung out with a lot of people. I was friends with everybody, but not close friends with anyone.

Because you hadn't had that intimate connection in your nuclear family.

No, I never had. That's right; exactly right. I hated Christmas, let me put it that way, because all my friends got all these wonderful presents, which I never did. I would get literally, an orange, or a walnut, or my uncle's refurbished scooter. Something like that. And also, the men died around Christmastime. So, Christmas, which is supposed to be the big family joyous time, was always sort of the saddest time. My aunt, she joined the military also during the war—SPAR, that's the Coast Guard, which then gave her military preference, veteran's preference for a really good job with the post office. She never married, never had children. She taught me how to be a man, and discovered at age eighty that she was lesbian. But in between that, she'd never made the connection. And so, I learned to be a man from this, again, not loving, but matter-of-fact, hardworking woman. And my mother was off being a university professor, and didn't pay much attention. My grandmother had all this personal sorrow and hardship, because she had lived a fairly good middleclass life, and suddenly no money, no income, she had to do a lot of working on her own. And so, we were just all expected to do our duty.

Did you ever go on a walkabout to find your father's family?

Well, yes and no. We were brought back, and I never wondered, I never felt the loss of a father. In fact, if I may say before I get directly to that, in looking back, I was always glad I didn't have a father, when I looked at other fathers and other families with fathers. I was glad that I didn't have somebody say: That's not the way we do it in this family. No one said that to me. There was no one telling me that we have to behave a certain way, because this is the way the family does things. I also like my name, Dator,

because it's a simple-sounding name, but there's no ethnicity attached to it whatsoever. And it turns out now in this day of the internet that there are Dators, Dator in the Philippines. But I don't think there's any connection to that. I suspect it was something like Dieter or Datorovich, or something that got shortened to it. But at least I never had ethnicity, I never had a father, I never had a family history. And that's one of the reasons I became a futurist, I think.

Because?

Because I didn't have a past that was telling me how to behave. I needed to find my own identity.

As a young adult, Jim Dator continued to look forward, while studying the past. He graduated with a degree in ancient and medieval history and philosophy at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida, where his mother was a professor. He then earned a PhD in political science at the American University in Washington, D.C., and briefly considered becoming a priest, before deciding to center his career on teaching.

My very first job as a teacher with a PhD was to go to Japan, where I taught in a Japanese university in a college of law and politics in Japanese for six years. I encountered a group of people from an established university in Japan called Rikkyo Daigaku in the Ikebukuro section of Tokyo, if you're familiar with it. And they had created a new college of law and politics in this old established university, one of the so-called Big Six Universities. And they wanted a new political scientist, a young political scientist to come and bring the American style of politics to that university. And they said: We'll send you to Yale to learn intensive Japanese. And so, for nine months, from eight in the morning 'til five at night, every day for nine months, I studied oral Japanese. I didn't know how to read and write, I didn't know how to read and write anything; I just knew how to speak.

Futurist Jim Dator says that his six years working and teaching in Japan was a profound experience, and sparked his interest in future studies.

And while I was there, I met a person who said: Jim, I want you to read this article I've written; it's called The Senior Partner, and it analyzes Japan as a civilization. And he concluded that Japan went through the same stages, in the same order that the West did, each one about the same length of time, and that Japan was two hundred years ahead of the West. And I said: What? This is 1963, 64. Didn't we just beat them in a war? Aren't they underdeveloped? Aren't we the crown of creation? Well, I never argued or cared whether he was right about Japan. It just said: Well, wait, we have these theories of moving from underdeveloped, to developing, to developed, but what's next? Development—didn't say it then, and it doesn't say it now. It makes it act as though we're the end of history. Well, that is what made me a futurist. That episode

in 1963, it happened to be on the day that John Kennedy was assassinated, which is another part of the story. But I said: Okay, I'm now gonna ask what's next. And so, all of the work I subsequently did in future studies came from that day, and I oriented all my teaching towards the future from that.

After a half-dozen years in Japan, Jim Dator returned to the United States and started the first accredited future studies program in the country at Virginia Tech. In 1969, Dr. Dator came to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa to teach future studies. When he arrived, he found that Hawai'i was interested in futurism and had recently launched statewide activities called Hawai'i 2000 that would examine the possible futures of Hawai'i.

When I arrived, Governor Burns and Tadao Beppu, and David McClung, and the people in the business community, and the labor unions, and the University, had already started something called Hawai'i 2000, which was an activity to look thirty years ahead. I had nothing to do with it; it had already been created. But Glenn Paige, remember, of the political science department, was sort of the secretary of that. And he said: Well, you know, we got this futurist at the University; why don't you join the group. And that is what really, really, beyond anything else, turned me into a futurist. Because that activity, which has never been equaled anywhere in the world, never been equaled here in Hawai'i—we've tried several times, but the powers that be don't really want to have people thinking about alternative futures. But at that point in 1970, statehood was good, the future was looking good, tourism was just beginning to blossom, they wanted to look ahead optimistically, and it was no holds barred. We had incredible variety of people, all islands had their own—Maui 2000, Kaua'i 2000, and so forth. There were student groups, youth groups, university groups, elderly groups, women's groups, all sorts of different groups. If you look at the number of lectures, the numerous talks I gave to groups during that time, thousands of them. Honolulu Magazine in '73 or so said I could have been elected governor, 'cause I knew so many people. It was an incredible opportunity, a deep dive into Hawai'i culture and thinking about the future. I'm obviously still excited about it.

Interesting that you say that people were excited about the future, and therefore, they wanted to peer into it. Do you find they don't really want to look too far if they suspect the worst?

Not anymore. I mean, even at that time—if you read the book, Hawai'i 2000, the book exists, and there is a list of people who attended, the who's who of the future, as well as of the present. But if you look at it, all of the married women are Mrs. John Doe. None of them have their own first name there.

Ah ...

Can you imagine how un-futuristic that was? It's embarrassing to look at that. But in any event, the groups of people who participated in it made me very optimistic about being able to change things, and all sorts of ideas. There were a number of task forces, and if you read each one of the recommendations of the task forces in their area, there was a desire to have open land, and high-rises, and mass transit. So, the idea is, we would not do what actually happened, divide up the large estates and give everybody a little piece of land. We would in fact have as few landholders as possible holding things in trust, and we would keep land open as much as possible, and use high-rises spread throughout each one of the islands, linked by mass transit. That was one example. The things that we got most right was, we basically predicted the cell phone, and the network, internet. If you read it, that's almost totally predicted. And we basically understood the changes in genetic engineering, and so forth; all the things that are now very controversial. We understood that those would be emerging issues. So, in the area of technology, we did a pretty good job. Completely missed the entire Hawaiian renaissance. The Hawaiians that we had on the committee, and we had a lot, were of that generation that assumed they would be lost, that there would instead be what Governor Burns called The Golden People of the Pacific.

Yeah. So, they were probably older, because that was the Western generation.

And they didn't speak Hawaiian, and they were forbidden to speak Hawaiian.

And yet, the Hawaiian Renaissance was knocking on the door at that time.

If was already existing. So, on the one hand, we missed women's liberation, if you will, and we missed the Hawaiian Renaissance, even though they were there. So, the moral to that story, and it's still true, it's a lot easier to predict, if you will, technology than it is social changes. And that's still a problem for futurists.

In 1971, the State Legislature established the Hawaii Research Center for Future Studies at UH Mānoa, and appointed Jim Dator as its director. Dr. Dator has developed the program into a world-renowned institution for futures research, and helped to educate four decades of futurists.

In general, during your just very long and successful career in academics, have people taken what you've said to heart and made changes?

Well, everyone said at the end of Hawai'i 2000 or other things, people will come up and tell me that such-and-such an event changed their life. So, I think that individuals have acted on it, but in fact, there was a point in the late 70s, after the so-called Arab oil crisis, when suddenly we realized that Hawai'i is not really independent, that it's highly vulnerable, that if the oil stops coming, things don't go well, in which it became forbidden to think about alternative futures. Even though Governor Ariyoshi used that

term, and he did a better job than almost anyone else in doing futures work, it was still relatively select. And the thing that worked, tourism, he didn't want anything to upset that. And so, you couldn't really begin to think about other alternatives. And so, I'd say from that point on, this heavily citizen-based free expression of ideas about alternative futures has been pretty much discouraged. But there are certain other things that I have harped on over, and over, and over, and over again, like climate change, sea level rise, and so forth, that we still are debating and figuring out what we ought to do about. We say we're gonna do something, but in fact, we're not yet really doing anything.

How do you gauge your success as a futurist?

Well, when I deal with a client, the success is not whether they enjoyed the activity. Often, they do, and will say what I said earlier; it really changed my thinking. If the organization then institutionalizes future studies as part of their planning and policymaking, if they hire a futurist or engage in a process of getting information from the future of building their strategic plan around a prior futures activity—most don't; most just go back.

Even after recruiting you and getting the getting you to study something?

Yeah, and enjoying it. They go back, but some don't. The State of Virginia, for example, did incorporate futures into their judicial planning. And there are other examples here and there, but basically, that's my definition. Other futurists might have other criteria. Did it make a difference in the way they did business? Do they now routinely begin to try to look ahead or not? And we haven't learned to do that as people, yet. And who can blame us. We have millions of years of responding only to immediate pressures. It's in our genes, it's in our psychology, it's in our stories. Look backwards in order to understand what lies ahead.

In addition to leading future studies at the University of Hawai'i, Jim Dator served as secretary general, and then president, of the World Future Studies Federation. Even though he's retired, he continues to travel, teach, and consult. At the time of our conversation in late 2018, he was teaching Space Humanity courses at the International Space University in France and the Korea Institute for Future Studies. Mahalo to Dr. Jim Dator of Waikiki, Hawai'i. And thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

Futurists who are being minted now at the PhD level; how do they differ from you?

Well, they're a lot smarter.

No, really.

No, that's really. I have some fantastic students. In fact, on Saturday, I will hood my last PhD student, since I've retired from the University of Hawai'i. And he's an absolutely fantastic guy who is already doing so many wonderful things all around the world.

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