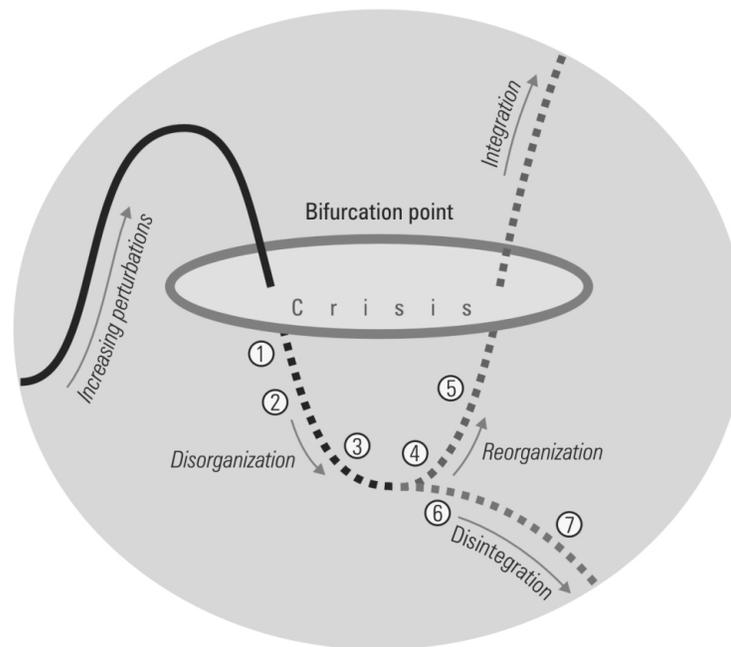


Five Archetypal Futures Scenarios¹

Oliver Markley, PhD



The springboard effect helps systems reorganize

- ① People lose faith in the industrial system as crises worsen
- ② Human and economic resources are released from the system
- ③ Support increases for both inclusive (sustainable) and exclusive (ethnocentric) solutions
- ④ If sustainable solutions are supported, constructive reorganization begins
- ⑤ The reorganization of the global system accelerates
or
- ⑥ If ethnocentric values and structures dominate, conflicts over scarce resources intensify
- ⑦ Global civilization disintegrates

© BEST Futures, www.bestfutures.org

Figure One: A Diagram of Alternative Mega-Crisis Possibilities

Source: Diagram Seven in Taylor, Duncan M. & Graeme M. Taylor. (2007), [The collapse and transformation of our world](#). *Journal of Futures Studies*, 11(3): 29-46. Based, in part, on the "Cycle of Adaptation" from [Panarchy Theory](#).

1. **VUCA** - an "Expected" or Present Trends Extended (PTE) future:
The "**VUCA**" world of rapidly increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, plus intensifying fiscal imbalance and indebtedness and untended ecological problems brings increasingly frequent and severe disruptions—both fiscal, political and ecological—as shown in the first part of the above diagram. However, this scenario assumes that the basic fabric of social order remains intact, thereby avoiding a major tipping point toward civilizational disruption and/or disintegration.

2. **Civilizational Disintegration** - a “Challenging” or worst case future.
Possibly as early as 2015, quite likely by 2020 and almost certainly by 2030 if current VUCA trends continue, there is a major tipping point toward civilizational disruption caused by a cascading confluence of STEEPly disruptive triggering events (ecological disasters, economic meltdowns, governance failures, societal rioting and massive immigration attempts, etc. As things begin spinning out of control, many suggestions and attempts are made to move toward recovery. This scenario assumes that tendencies toward ethnocentric selfishness and xenophobia trump tendencies toward integrative synergy, with failed states and civilizational disintegration continuing as shown in the lower path of bifurcation in the diagram.

3. **Reformative Civilizational Recovery** - An “Aspirational” (Visionary) future.
Whether or not a tipping point toward civilizational disintegration occurs (as in the beginning of Scenario Two), things move into the upper path of bifurcation due to seeds that were planted by futurists, citizen activists and other proactive thought leaders well beforehand, and by massive “crowd sourcing” and “collective intelligence” efforts using internet-based social networking technologies by forward thinking thought leaders.

4. **Civilizational Enlightenment** - An “Audaciously Aspirational” future.
A peaceful and progressive “soft landing” from the intensifying disruptions of Scenario One occurs due to an integrity-oriented reformation visibly triggered, by proactive efforts as in Scenario Three, and less visibly—but perhaps more importantly—by a wide-spread transcendental awakening, bringing an evolutionary cultural ascension to what integral theorists call “Level Two” consciousness.

5. **Singularity** – A second “Audaciously Aspirational” future.
Computer-based technologies attain some type of consciousness, aided and abetted by transhuman capacities expected to emerge by 2030 if Scenario One holds together that long.

NOTE: These five scenarios are conceived as future histories, all of which are to some extent “Type II Wild Cards” (high probability as seen by those with relevant expert knowledge, but low credibility as seen by most others). Thus:

- If Scenario One: *VUCA*, holds together until 2030, Scenario 5: *The Singularity* as envisioned by Ray Kurzweil could emerge. Otherwise it is not likely to be feasible.

- If Scenario One: *VUCA*, triggers a mega-crisis tipping point toward civilizational disruption, this could lead to the worst case of Scenario 2: *Civilizational Disintegration*; or the best case of Scenario Three: *Reformative Civilizational Recovery* and/or Scenario Four: *Civilizational Enlightenment*.

- Scenario Four: *Civilizational Enlightenment* could presumably unfold at any time, but is thought to be likely only after something like Scenario Three: *Reformative Civilizational Recovery* matures.

Sources:

The archetypal logic of these scenarios is based on the [Aspirational Futures Method](#) pioneered by Clem Bezold at the Institute of Alternative Futures:

1. Expected (PTE)
2. Challenging (fearful)
3. Aspirational (hopeful)
4. Audaciously aspirational (visionary).

Their content is largely based on Oliver Markley's:

- [Research and action toward the upside of down](#), which won the Jan Lee Martin Foundation prize for “best futures essay” of 2011,
- [Manifesting upside recovery instead of downside fear: Five ways megacrisis anticipation can proactively improve futures research and social policy](#) (2011),
- [Imaginal Visioning for Prophetic Foresight](#) (2012).

Specific citations and links for media supporting specific scenarios include the following:

Scenario One – VUCA

Gore, Al (2013), *The Future: Six Drivers of Social Change*, New York, NY: Random House.
 Greer, John Michael. (2008). *The long descent: A user's guide to the end of the industrial age*. Philadelphia: New Society.
 Johansen, Bob (2012), *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World*, 2nd ed, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Kohler.

Scenario Two – Civilizational Disintegration

Beddoe, Rachael, Robert Costanza, Joshua Farley, Eric Garza, Jennifer Kent, Ida Kubiszewski, Luz Martinez, Tracy McCowen, Kathleen Murphy, Norman Myers, Zach Ogden, Kevin Stapleton, & John Woodward, (2009), The evolutionary redesign of worldviews, institutions, and technologies. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106(8), 2483–2489 (<http://www.pnas.org/content/106/8/2483.full>).

Scenario Three – Reformative Civilizational Recovery

Homer-Dixon, Thomas (2006), *The upside of down: Catastrophe, creativity, and the renewal of civilization*. Washington, DC: Island.
 Laszlo, Ervin, Deepak Chopra and Mikhail Gorbachev (2009), *WorldShift 2012: Making Green Business, New Politics, and Higher Consciousness Work Together*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
 McKibben, Bill. (2010), *Eaarth: Making Life on a Tough New Planet*. New York: Times Books.
 Steffen, Alex (2011), *Worldchanging, Revised and Updated Edition: A User's Guide for the 21st Century*. New York, NY: Abrams.

Scenario Four – Civilizational Enlightenment

Hubbard, Barbara Marx (1998). *Conscious Evolution: Awakening Our Social Potential*. Navato, CA: New World Library.
 Laszlo, Ervin & Kingsley L. Dennis (forthcoming, May, 2013), *Dawn of the Akashic Age: New Consciousness, Quantum Resonance, and the Future of the World*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
 Miller, Ruth L. (2011), *Make the World Go Away: The Gift of 2012*. Newport, OR: Portal Center Press.

Scenario Five – Singularity

Kurtzweil, Ray (2005), *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, New York, NY: Penguin Group

¹ These scenarios were prepared for “Alternative Images for the Future of Cities,” a keynote presentation to kick off the 2013 Home-Coming day of the University of Houston’s Studies of the Future Program on “*City Making in the 21st Century – Designing Urban Futures.*” An audio recording of the presentation and the visuals that were used are available online at <http://www.imaginalvisioning.com/visioning-futures/>.