

# Why Imagine The Future?

*by Elise Boulding*

Fred Polak was one of the first thinkers to call attention to the atrophy of our capacity to visualize a wholly different future. His *Image for the Future* (1953) was written for a Europe paralyzed by the experience of World War II.

According to Polak, the human capacity to create mental images of the "totally other" - that which has never been experienced or recorded - is the key dynamic of history. At every level of awareness, from the individual to the macrosocietal, imagery is continuously generated about the *not-yet*. Such imagery inspires our intentions, which then move us purposefully forward. Through daily choices of action, individuals, families, enterprises, communities, and nations move toward that which they imagine to be a desirable tomorrow.

Polak points out, however, that historically alternating waves of optimism and pessimism about reality roll through time, as do alternative views about the end of the world. Sometimes humans are seen as partners with God or Nature, other times as helpless objects of supernatural action.

In Polak's reading of history, optimism about reality combined with a utopian sense of human empowerment set in motion a powerful dynamic. Utopian optimism has characterized the Western worldview of recent centuries - but not of the last few decades.

In eras when pessimism combines with a sense of cosmic helplessness, the quality of human intentionality declines and, with it, the quality of imagery of the not-yet. Societies in that condition live bounded by the present, with no social dynamic for change available to them. This is our situation in the post-World War II Western world.

## **A Way Past Destruction**

My own lifetime of 75 years, and my reading of history, has shown me over and over again that no matter how bad things are, the human race has been there before - been there, and found a way past destruction. It is finding the way past destruction that makes imaging so important.

At a time when spreading ethnic conflict is inducing something of the same kind of paralysis that people felt at the close of World War II, it seems urgent to undertake imaging a world three decades hence, when new social identities, social structures, and social processes have emerged that will bridge the chasm between the One-Third and the Two-Thirds Worlds that looks so unbridgeable today.

What can keep imaging from being escapist is that it is grounded in a deeper spiritual awareness of the human condition, grounded in an intellectual awareness of human folly, and grounded in an historical resonance with human groupings from the earliest hunting

and gathering bands, whose oldest tales tell us of fireside imaginings of human beings living together in a green and lovely world, in peacefully shared abundance, knowing love and joy.

What gives me confidence that the imaging process is basically a sound one, is that, despite cultural differences, the same basic image themes appear in the imagined utopias of the ancient past as appear in the imagery of our late-20th century imagers - a clean, green world of abundance, joyfully shared by men and women. This kind of imaging is a special human gift, that no follies have been able to extinguish. And as long as we can imagine a better world with minds adequately equipped for the complexities of the 21st century, we will be able to work for it.

*Elise Boulding is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Dartmouth College, now living in Boulder, Colorado. Active in the peace research community since the 1950s, she has also written extensively on women's roles and in the field of future studies.*

*This piece was drawn from articles about the World Without Weapons workshops developed by Ms. Boulding and Warren Zeigler. For more information, you will find the workshop protocols in Building a Global Civic Culture: Education for an Inter-dependent World by Elise Boulding, published by Syracuse University Press. A collection of essays called The Future: Images and Processes by Elise and Kenneth Boulding, was just published by Sage Publications.*