



ANDREW MAYNARD, PHD

Foreword by Cady Coleman, NASA Astronaut

FUTURE RISING

A Journey from the Past
to the Edge of Tomorrow

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world in turmoil. As I write, we are grappling with a future-changing global pandemic, refugees are being held in less-than-human conditions as they strive to build a better future, a growing wave of populism and nationalism is sparking another type of global epidemic—this one of mean-spirited inhumanity, and people the world over are being denied the futures they aspire to because of the narrow-mindedness of others. And over everything, there's the looming disaster of climate change, as we sacrifice long-term sustainability for short-term gain.

It's a picture of the present that doesn't bode well for the future. Yet, dire as the outlook seems, it is not inevitable. Despite appearances, our collective ability to imagine and build the future we aspire to has never been greater. With advances in science and technology, we are on the cusp of mastering biology, of creating machines that think, and of conquering seemingly-incurable diseases. Our understanding of people and society is revealing pathways toward more equitable and just futures. And we're beginning to figure out ever-more-effective ways of living sustainably within the constraints of the planet we inhabit.

And yet, unless we better understand our relationship with the future and our responsibility to it, there will remain a gaping chasm between what we are capable of and what we

achieve. As a species, we are profoundly talented architects of our own future. But to do the job well, we need to get a much better grip on where we're heading, and how to ensure it's a better place than the one we came from. This is a responsibility we all face. And as we do, we each need to find our own personal threads that tie together past and future, and learn how to weave them together into a bigger picture of what humanity could become.

This, though, is no mean task. Every day, we're bombarded with information and advice in a cascade of news, commentary, and opinion that conspires to hide and tangle these threads—often leaving us feeling dazed and confused. And sometimes, we simply need to take time out—to find a still, quiet place, where we can begin to piece together a picture of the future that makes sense.

But finding such a quiet place isn't easy. We're obsessed with the future, to such an extent that it can threaten to overwhelm us. We avidly suck up news feeds and forecasts to get a glimpse of what's coming down the pike. We immerse ourselves in social media to keep up with what's on trend, and what's not. We consume book after book about the future that tells us what we're doing to destroy it, how technology will transform it, how our wrong-headedness is hampering it, and how our intelligence is manufacturing it. And we surround ourselves with science fiction stories that guide and color our ideas of how the future *might* pan out.

And yet, despite all of this, we rarely take the time to hit the reset button and think afresh about what the future is, where it came from, why it's so integral to our lives, and what our responsibilities to it are.

It's this metaphorical reset button that I set out to hit in this series of short reflections. My aim was to make them long enough to help carve out a quiet space for reflection, but short enough that they don't add to the noise. Through them, I hope to take you on a journey into what the future is, why it matters, and how we can collectively navigate toward one we aspire to as we live our lives together.

What emerges is a journey into our understanding of the future that spans history, starting at the very beginning of all things, with the celestial "big bang," and ending with our responsibility to ensure that coming generations inherit a better future than the one passed on to us. It's a journey of twists and turns, of unexpected insights, and serendipitous delights. And it's one that, step by step, builds a picture, not only of what the future is, but what our roles and responsibilities are in crafting and creating it.

Like all pictures, of course, this is one that tells a story that is far from complete. Look closely, and there are broad brushstrokes where you might expect fine detail, and curious omissions where you might expect deep insights. Yet step back, and a unique portrait of the future emerges

that sheds new light on its relationship to us, and our responsibility to it.

It's also a portrait that, despite the turmoil we see around us in the present, gives us hope for a future that could far exceed our expectations—as long as we all play our part in building it.