

# Heartstorming

## Putting the Vision Back into Community Visioning with Guided Imagery

By Wendy Sarkissian

### Community Visioning: Why a Conversation Is Needed

I enjoy workshops conducted by other planners. There is always something to learn, even for an old hand. But in recent years, I've become increasingly concerned about the proprietary offerings of consultants selling "community visioning" models to Australia, where I am based. It's bad enough being at the bottom of the Earth. We suffer from the "VOE" ("Visiting Overseas Expert") problem. Over the past few decades, we've had our share of VOEs offering advice on community visioning exercises and undertaking community visioning programs all over this country and in New Zealand.

I have real problems with their so-called "visioning" models. A first concern is that the proprietary models have not been subjected to any formal scrutiny. No formal evaluation has been undertaken and it seems these models have limited benefits and at best encourage inclusion and yield optimistic and short-term "feel-good" results. But more than that, these models are not about visioning; they are simply planning models. And planning models are fine, as long as nobody is claiming that they are creative, visionary, imaginary or likely to yield greater insights and creativity than we get with Delphi, brainstorming, mind mapping, scenario planning, role plays, future searches or just plain planning.



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Photos: Bonnyrigg, Sydney, 2005, by the author

Some of these models smell suspiciously like snake oil.

### Definitions and Definitional Problems

In the past decade, researchers critically examining the notion of community visioning have teased out definitions and identified its origins. Canadian academic Robert Shipley, who has made an extensive study of community visioning, says that in planning, visioning has as many as twenty meanings, virtually none of them consistent with each other. While there is among planners a "tacit assumption" about the meaning, the terms vision and goal are often used interchangeably, and vision is often confused with the term mission. Maybe, states Shipley, it's nothing more than "old wine in new bottles."

Shipley's work reveals that visioning is nothing new: it has both scriptural and classical roots, as well as roots in utopianism. The use of backcasting and setting a social situation in the future can be traced to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* (1888), written as a direct commentary about current social conditions in a story set in the future. Humanistic psychologists can also take some responsibility, with management and sports psychology popularizing the notion of visioning. Particularly influential was Tom Peters's *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*. Because Australian planners often don't operate in multidisciplinary realms and don't seem to get out much, they've mistakenly decided that visioning is something new. It's not; it's just new to them, having been around for a long time in other realms.

Systems of visioning that had a direct effect on planning began to appear in the early 1990s, with cognitive

mapping, Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* and Warren Ziegler's *Enspirited Envisioning: Transformative Practices for the Twenty-First Century*. More proprietary models followed, with consultant Steven Ames's (now) five-stage New Oregon Model, Visual Preference Analysis (Anton Tony Nelessen), community strategic visioning and community visioning. In planning, community visioning has been a popular planning tool for over a decade. A few models dominate, none of them "visionary."

Importantly, most community visioning processes are undertaken as part of planning processes initiated by government. I've had a manager of a large municipality explain that, while he didn't believe the five-stage approach was valuable, he was using the simple processes of a proprietary visioning model because it was easy to explain to his elected members and could be implemented within their short terms of office. Shipley's Canadian research found the same thing.

### Enspirited Envisioning

The late Warren Ziegler did truly try to make his visioning processes "visionary." In *Enspirited Envisioning: Transformative Practices for the Twenty-First Century* (1996), Ziegler says that "true" vision is an expression of our spirit and not knowledge, wishes or goals. A vision can be empty or crass if the spirit is absent. He implores us, when undertaking participatory work with communities and organizations, to "listen to the voice of the spirit." We need to be fully engaged. His



A table of Spanish-speaking residents in the guided imagery

model of envisioning is not making a wish list. It is also not forecasting the future, cognitive mapping, social engineering, Delphi, trend extrapolation or goal setting. The components are dialogue, deep imaging (eliciting images of the future), deep listening (listening to yourself or to other people with silence, attention and empathy and without judgment) and deep questioning (listening for whatever questions inside oneself insist on being asked and asking them). Unlike most practices in planning and development, Ziegler's approach is all about yielding rather than forcing. The process begins with focused imaging, described as "a special way of telling stories about the future you want and intend to bring about." This is followed by a "leap into the future" and deep listening, a component that requires us to engage with the future without judgment or preconditions and to share our images in the present tense. There are other authentic and creative visioning approaches, such as the work of Otto Scharmer and colleagues with Theory U. It is possible to go beyond simple visioning in planning contexts.

### My Approach to Community Visioning

In 1973, Professor Emerita Clare Cooper Marcus initiated me into the miracles of guided imagery. At the University of California at Berkeley, she used an innovative process called an "environmental autobiography" to invite students to explore their favorite childhood environments. A guided visualization called a "childhood fantasy" is a component of the process. Clare's work is chronicled in her book, *House as Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. Clare carefully prepared her students to explore their ideal childhood environments: "I find a period of quiet, relaxed breathing starts to get people out of their normal, academic, logical way of thinking, and opens them up into a more loose, fantasy state."

Once having entered into the guided imagery, the journeying person sees a figure in the distance walking towards them. They feel slightly curious to discover that the figure is a person—themselves as a child. (I remember looking down to see the small child's hand in mine and feeling a strong and palpable connection.) Then you-the-adult fades away and you-the-child starts to explore the favorite childhood place, experiencing

all its qualities from your unique child's perspective. Carefully worded cues encourage the sense of touch, smell, feeling and recollection of special events. In her guided imagery script, Clare leaves plenty of silent periods for contemplation and remembering.

How do we bring participants back so that they can record what they have experienced? Cooper Marcus reminds us that this can be a very profound experience that takes people into a state of consciousness not normally experienced in the classroom. Therefore, a firm and structured ending is called for to bring them into the next stage of recording what they experienced. Her suggestions are to:

ask them to lie down in their fantasy, in what they consider to be the center or heart of their environment, to close their eyes (still in fantasy—they have them closed already in reality) and then listen to my voice slowly counting from ten down to zero; as they listen, they will gradually leave their child-self and their child-environment and return to the here and now—and open their eyes.

Clare asks participants to draw in silence with their non-dominant hand and to write about their experience both objectively and subjectively. Sharing insights with other participants adds another dimension.



Sharing my vision

My approach to community guided imagery builds on Clare's work and the work of many practitioners and theorists and reflects years of experimentation. The method I use is a variation of guided imagery, an approach widely used in management, therapeutic and sports psychology contexts. Guided imagery can cut through intellectual blocks by calling on people's imagination; it also enables people to tap into their own memories and instincts. I use a carefully crafted script to take a group on an imaginary passage into the future. People make themselves comfortable, close their eyes, clear their minds and, at my instruction, either recall and experience the past or imagine the future. It can be useful to give participants the "feel" for a situation or to understand how things might appear from another person's point of view or at another point in time. I have found that everyone is capable of visioning. In a workshop for builders working in small homebuilding companies in Melbourne in 1990, participants visualized their ideal suburban environment, incorporating sites with a mix of zoning and with medium-density housing, and then collectively drew their visions using their non-dominant hands. The result was a splendidly creative representation that surprised some onlookers. An angry builder retorted, "What makes you think that builders can't dream?!"

### Setting the Scene

By far the most successful guided imagery workshops are those that are co-designed with community members and their advocates, who can help us with ideas that have worked before and can support deep work by demystifying the process with other community members. This collaborative approach enables you to tailor guided imagery approaches. Asking for and receiving permission is very important with certain cultural groups for which guided imagery or role plays may not be appropriate.

Guided imagery is a right-brain activity that forces people to break out of analytical thinking patterns, which may be exactly what critical thinkers need to solve their problem. There are ways to reach an understanding of a situation through guided imagery that are not possible exclusively via rational thought processes.

The beginning of the script must be well thought-out. Many proponents of guided imagery emphasize the importance of pre-framing. It's wise to prepare participants for the intensity of the process they are about to experience and to explain that guided imagery is not a strange "way-out" experience but is used often, especially in sports psychology, and increasingly in business and organizational development, to help people improve performance and achieve clarity about their goals and plans. My pre-framing is designed to put people at ease and convince them that this is not a recruitment session for the Church of the Cosmic Banana.

The wording of the script is critical to success. There is much more to community visioning than sitting around, brainstorming, imagining an ideal future and writing down the key points. By paying attention to careful wording, we can ensure that we prompt only in a generic sense. Rather than guide participants into a bus station or a train, we can ask them to visualize the transportation interchange, allowing them to work out for themselves what the mode of transportation might be. The key is to cue for a response but keep it generic while stimulating participants' unique intelligences, communication and learning styles.



Sophia van Ruth reading the guided imagery script

The nature of the guided imagery is largely determined by the needs of the planning project. What is important is that the participants' privacy be respected (they can sign forms to allow us to use the material if we need to) and that all their material is analyzed in the most respectful and thorough manner. Drawings may be copied and themes and qualities drawn out for further analysis. We try to return the drawings as soon as possible to participants, so it's helpful to have a color printer or photocopier on hand. Where permission is given, all contributions must be acknowledged in reports. Participants may feel a strong attachment to the product of a deep process and may be unwilling to have their drawings reproduced.

I strongly believe that genuine community visioning—using principles of guided imagery—can help people tap into their heartfelt hopes and dreams for the future of their communities. In forty years of using this approach, I have found that it can be used in any setting. Sharing our dreams is part of the work of progressive planning. It's one place with a level playing field—anyone can dream! Working with the sophisticated and tested methods of guided imagery, we can help bring about the future that is waiting to be born.

And it's a lot more fun than rational five-step planning processes.

It's difficult to capture the quality of a guided imagery experience when participants seem to align with a common desire to create a happy future for their community. That's very different from a common vision—and it's very powerful. Listening to people share their images often brings me to tears.

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An image of a "People Place"