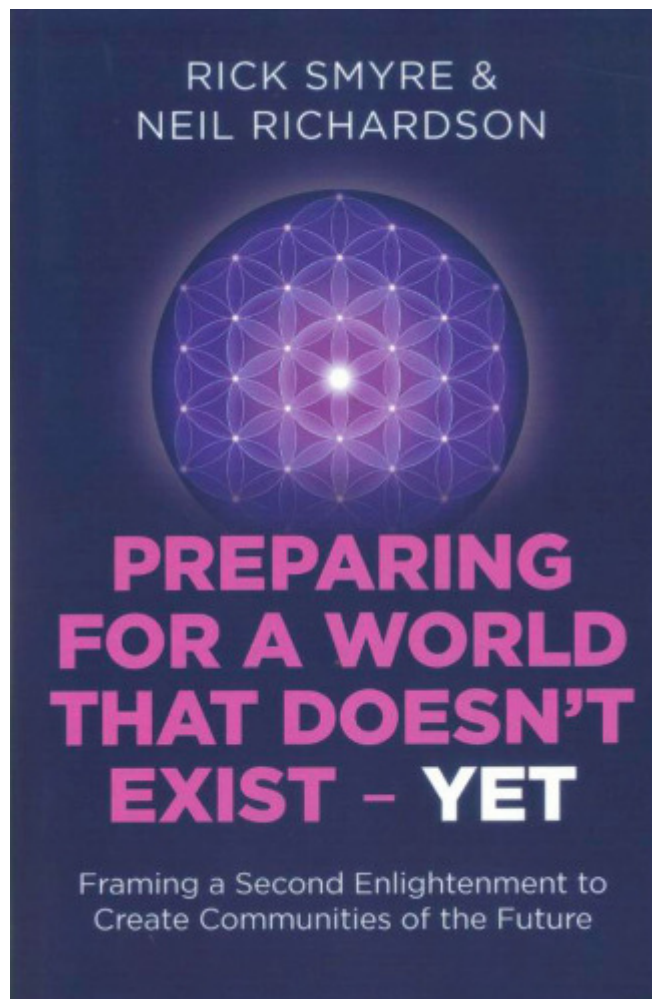


A Major Shift:

Book gives context for controversial debates

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“Preparing for a World that Doesn’t Exist – Yet: Framing a Second Enlightenment to Create Communities of the Future” by Rick Smyre and Neil Richardson. Washington, D.C.: Changemakers Books (an imprint of John Hunt Publishing), 2016, 248 pages, \$20.95.



“We are living on the precipice of a new era in human history,” Rick Smyre and Neil Richardson explain near the beginning of “Preparing for a World that Doesn’t Exist – Yet: Framing a Second Enlightenment to Create Communities of the Future,” their new treatise on what it will take to successfully negotiate the tectonic paradigm shift we will be grappling with during the next few decades. “This book offers a new approach for an emerging society that will be increasingly fast-paced, interconnected, interdependent and complex.”

“Planning for a different kind of society and economy will require us to have an understanding of the past, yet to be defined by a vision focused on the future,” they continue. “Communities and organizations requiring fundamental change will need to approach the present and the future with an open mind. The issues of population growth, global warming, economic transformation and loss of biological diversity are all interrelated for the first time in human history. As a result, traditional ideas and old models have become obsolete.”

It does not take Smyre and Richardson long to jump headlong into the fray of some of the more controversial debates taking place within our society. They do a pretty good job of providing a realistic context for many of those debates; indeed, the manuscript is filled with real-world case studies that serve to flesh out many of their arguments in a convincing and substantive manner. Whenever I have occasion to dissect these kinds of prescriptive volumes, however, I typically evaluate their efficacy using two criteria. First, has the underlying problem or issue been adequately defined? It is obvious the authors have made a commendable effort to lay out the core issues underlying their call for action. Second, are the proposed solutions rational, realistic and reasonable? With respect to this second standard, the evidence is a little more questionable. They seem to be espousing a process more than a specific course of action.

Full disclosure: I had the opportunity to meet and spend some time with Smyre when he visited Western Kentucky University a few years ago. He is clearly a visionary when it comes to his ideas and strategies for keeping democracy alive in the midst of the unavoidable transformation we are

experiencing. Still, he is a firm believer that we have taken our representative form of government (as originally envisioned by the founders) as far as we can and what we are currently seeing is the result of reaching an inevitable threshold precipitated by the technological revolution of the last 50 years.

“The age of representative democracy, as we know it, will slowly fade into the dimming glow of Industrial Society,” the authors assert in “The Emergence of Polycentric Democracy and Mobile Collaborative Governance,” the fifth chapter. “It has served us well, but is too slow to adapt to constantly changing conditions . . . many people see the solution to today’s dysfunctional democracy in reclaiming the past. But, trying to find the answers for a different kind of constantly changing future in the ideas and methods of a time of history that looks backward when change evolved slowly, will only lead to frustration and increasing disillusionment.”

“Preparing for a World” is comprised of a prologue, six chapters and an epilogue that can easily be read – if not fully digested – in one or two sittings. Although the basic concepts Smyre and Richardson seem to be articulating are fairly straightforward, the language they use can be distracting because many of the terms and phrases they employ do not utilize familiar definitions. As such, sometimes the logic is a bit difficult to follow. There were many times I thought they were on to something profound, but I could never be quite sure exactly if it was due to the ambiguous wording and vague references. For instance, reflect upon the following from “Emerging from the Mist: The Rise of a Second Enlightenment,” the inaugural chapter:

“Connective thinking, in combination with processes of generative dialogue, leads to synthesis and new ideas. The very nature of seeing new connections is the basis for continuous innovations and continuous transformation. Once a new idea is developed using connective thinking, new strategies become important to implement the idea. This requires a combination of non-linear, connective thinking to build effective parallel processes, and linear thinking to make sure effective actions are taken with accountable outcomes defined. A constantly changing society will require leaders to become proficient in both linear, cause and effect thinking, and non-linear, connective thinking, and be able to use both when appropriate. The matrix for understanding an issue in totality is to see it from the most perspectives possible.”

I think I know what they are saying here, and it may indeed be weighty, but I confess I’m not quite sure since much of their prose requires the reader to navigate some rather turbulent semantic gymnastics. The challenge represented by this approach to the material will no doubt cause some to abandon their quest to understand exactly what they are advocating for and why; it is definitely good that they decided to include a glossary at the conclusion of the main narrative.

Smyre is president of the Center for Communities of the Future and has degrees from Davidson College and North Carolina State University. He served on the staff of the National Economic Development Institute for 14 years and has published a number of influential articles and book chapters related to community transformation. Richardson is director of advancement, partnerships and continuing education at the University of the District of Columbia and founder of Integral Action, a consulting firm that helps elected officials better engage the public on emerging issues; he has degrees from the University of South Florida as well as Georgetown University. Smyre and Richardson have collaborated on several projects since 1991. This is their first book.

If you have an interest in this type of quasi-philosophical discourse, which has undeniable implications for our collective future, you might want to pick up a copy.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.