Future Search Network

"Future Search in the Age of Obama"

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Graphic Recording: Edwin Ferran

The Network

A voluntary world-wide Network offering public, non-profit and NGO Future Search processes and training for whatever people can afford. Join FSN and help make a more open, inclusive and sustainable world.

The Method

An interactive planning process used world-wide in diverse cultures to achieve shared goals and fast action. Future Search leads to cooperative planning that lasts for years.

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ABSTRACT

Future Search Network (FSN) is a collaboration of hundreds of dedicated volunteers' worldwide providing Future Search conferences as a public service. The Learning Exchange is the annual gathering of the FSN. The 2009 Learning Exchange organizers decided to conduct a dialog about Future Search using elements of the Future Search process to explore how to mobilize Network members and use the power of Future Search to create the world its members seek and hope to leave for their and other's children. Participants made timelines of key events in the world, their own lives, and in the history of the Future Search topic. The key question being considered throughout the Learning Exchange was what are the present trends affecting Future Search in the age of Obama that must be considered in planning for the future? Participants created a mind map to represent the broadest possible social, economic and technological context for dialogue and decision making and then reported on strengths and accomplishments they are proud of from their stakeholder perspectives or their "prouds." They also reported on the decisions that did not turn out as well as expected that need to be left behind or their "sorries." They then discussed their desired future scenarios; imagining a future they are willing to work toward. Participants were asked to put themselves 15 years into the future. After listening to the desired future scenarios, groups were asked to list common ground elements that reflects what people here want now and in the future.

FSN Members Who Attended

Hans Begeer - Overijse, Belguim
Ans Van Belen – Overijs, Belguim
Lisa Beutler - Sacramento, CA, USA
Charlotte Chorneau – Sacramento, CA, USA
Eric Crave – San Francisco, CA, USA
Barbara Dickinson – NY, NY, USA
Doris Dickinson – Newtown Square, PA, USA
Saul Eisen, Ph.D – Sebastopol, CA, USA
DorianFougeres – Sacramento, CA, USA
Pien Van Den Herik – Berkeley, CA, USA
Leslie Janoe – El Granada, CA, USA
Sandra Janoff – Wynnewood, PA, USA
Orrin D. Judd – Denville, NJ USA
Mia Konstantinidou – Kreuzberg, Germany
Alice Leibowitz – Hartford, CA, USA
Christal Love – Sacramento, CA, USA
Ann Martin – Ithaca, NY, USA
Terry Nelidov – San Francisco, CA, USA
Jennifer Neumer- Philadelphia, PA, USA
Kenoli Oleari – Berkeley, CA, USA
Marsha Pendergrass - San Francisco, CA, USA
Steven Piersanti – San Francisco, CA, USA
Mark Pixley – Guangdong, China
Dave Porter – Bellevue, WA, USA
Keke Quei – Shanghai, China
Loretta Raider – Melrose Park, PA, USA
Miachel Schwartz – Gainesville, FL, USA
Sally Stweart – Portola Vally, CA, USA
Marc Tognotti – Oakland, CA, USA
Eelke Visscher – Utrecht, Netherlands
Marvin Weisbord – Wynnewood, PA, USA

INTRODUCTION

Future Search Network (FSN) is a collaboration of hundreds of dedicated volunteers worldwide providing Future Search conferences as a public service. The Network serves communities, NGO's, and other non-profits for whatever people can afford.

*"The time is now, and we are ready: **Mobilizing the Network for Action"***

The mission of the FSN is to help communities everywhere become more open, supportive, equitable and sustainable. FSN also works with for-profit organizations who share these values, charging standard fees. FSN is a cross-cultural network, speaking many languages. Members live in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, Middle East, India and New Zealand, North and South America. FSN is based on principles of service, colleagueship and learning.

The Learning Exchange is the annual gathering of the FSN that started in 1995. The Network uses the time get up to date with each other, share learnings from their experiences, establish/grow relationships, and develop mentoring partnerships and other activities that strengthen the Network and its members. The 2009 was held March 29 - 31 at the historic and visually enchanting Ralston L. White Retreat Center in Mill Valley California. Convened just 11 miles north of the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge, participants met friends and colleagues old and new, shared stories, hopes and plans and talked over issues of mutual concern.

Learning Exchange 2009

The 2009 Learning Exchange organizers decided to conduct a dialog about Future Search using elements of the Future Search process (timelines, discussion of trends, and building of future skits) to explore how to mobilize Network members and use the power of Future Search to create the world its members seek and hope to leave for their and other's children.

People who attended came with a variety of experience from having run and organized many Future Searches to not having done any. All participants found opportunities to share ideas and plans for the year ahead. The objective was to build on the experience of the last year, when 46 members from the United States, Canada, Europe and Africa met in Johannesburg South Africa and learned about other Network members, what they're doing and what they want for themselves, their communities and for the world. As in the past, participants took this opportunity, as a community of Future Search practitioners, to the take next steps toward a vision of changing the world, one meeting at a time.

Graphic recorder Edwin Ferran captured and graphically represented the discussions that took place over the two and a half day meeting. His graphics appear throughout this report.

FOCUS ON THE PAST

Participants made timelines of key events in the world, their own lives, and in the history of the Future Search topic. The purpose is to put the Future Search topic on the broadest possible context and establish implications for this meeting. Participants were asked to build the timelines on the following four topics including data from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

- **Personal**: Key experiences in one's life.
- **Global**: Significant world events that have shaped our society.
- **Future Search Network**: Critical events and developments.
- **Collaborative, Whole Systems, Transparent Governance**: Critical events and developments.

After the timelines were completed small groups told stories about each timeline and the implications of their stories for the work they have come to do.

PERSONAL Timeline

According to the personal timeline, Learning Exchange participants are a multicultural and international group including many who have lived overseas. Overall the group appeared to be very socially conscious, with involvement in various men's and women's groups. The participants are multi-professional, portraying many career reinventions throughout the 30 years discussed. The group appeared to be pretty content group based as no personal tragedies were reported. The personal timeline did not show effervescent energy but rather energy focused internally, in groups. Over the last 30 years participants grew themselves, they grew their families and they grew their institutions. There was little evidence on the timeline of community involvement in the traditional sense. Participants cautioned that just because some things do not appear on the timeline does not mean they did not occur.

GLOBAL Timeline

The timeline showed trends of wars and conflicts in every decade. While the name of the enemy changed in every decade the concept of an enemy remained constant. Leadership and the way that it perceived people and communities changed over time, progressing from Reagan's idealism to Clinton and Bush and now to Obama. With so many changes occurring many things have remained the same. Other things have gotten increasingly complex such as communication, technology, global warming, and interconnections with the European economy. The world is getting flatter and smaller which brings about major benefits as well as costs. Meanwhile, the Future Search technology has stayed relatively similar throughout this time.

FUTURE SEARCH Timeline

Members acknowledged the work done by Eric Trist, Fred Emery, Kurt Lewin, and Ronald Lippet which helped to establish the Future Search method. Even though others were doing pieces of Future Search, considering and defining the whole system and bringing everyone in the room was a new concept. The single focus of efforts on the future was also a new concept unique to Future Search. Simultaneously, there were more voices wanting to be a part of discussion than ever before such as feminism, civil rights, and diversity. Other methods were developed for business such Total Quality Management (TQM). The implications and impacts of technology and globalization are still unknown and the current state is filled with much uncertainty.

GOVERNANCE Timeline

In terms of collaborative governance the timeline did not show a clear beginning. The group found it difficult to engage the question overall with no clear boundaries to the concept. Trends include an increasing use of technologies in the Obama era. Within the last three decades there has been an emergence of many large group methods such as Future Search, World Café and Open Space which run parallel with collaborative governance. There were many specific examples of collaborative governance shared on the timeline. One such example was in the city of Los Angeles with various neighborhood projects in an effort to re-involve citizens. Other examples include scenario planning in early 1990s, feminism and civil rights shift from dominance to partnership, Native American dialogues, and national legislation in US schools.

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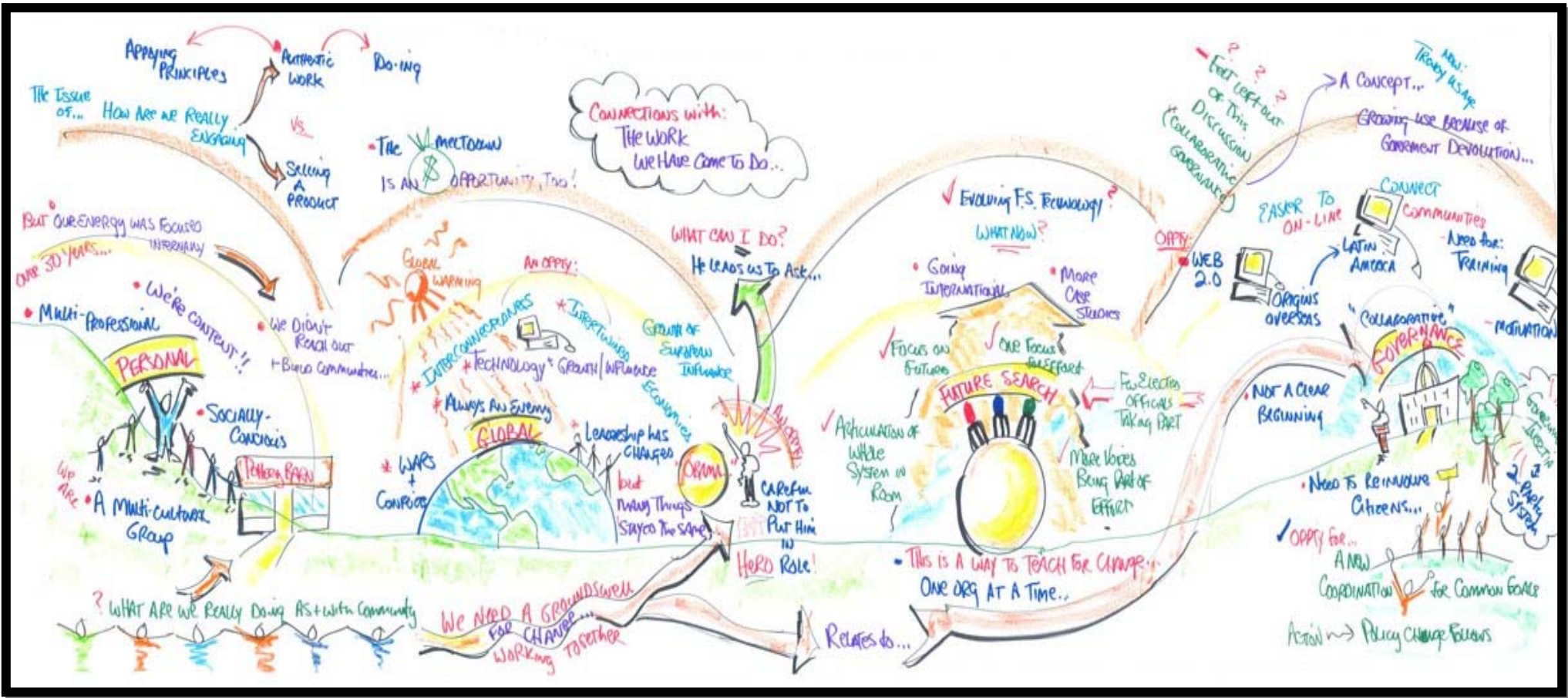
FOCUS ON THE PRESENT

Purpose: Create the broadest possible social, economic, and technological context for dialogue and decision-making (i.e. get everybody talking about the *same* world).

> **QUESTION:** What are the present trends affecting FUTURE SEARCH IN THE AGE OF OBAMA that must be considered in planning for the future?

Participants created a mind map to represent the broadest possible social, economic and technological context for dialogue and decision making. A mind map is a visual representation of the stressors and trends affecting the topic of Future Search in the Age of Obama.

Ground rules for mind-mapping
1. A trend implies direction of movement, from more to less, less to more, greater to smaller, smaller to greater, and so on. The objective is to *observe* what is happening and defer judgment and analysis.
2. This is a group brainstorm--no evaluation, no censorship, no agreement is required.
3. The person who names a trend says where it goes on the map.
4. Opposing trends are OK when backed up by examples.
5. Give concrete examples to support and explain trends.

The follow are some of the trends identified in the mind map exercise:
- **Systems are under increased stress** which creates less tolerance for impacts. However, people felt that the more chaotic and complex the system the more opportunity for change. The age is ripe for collaboration.
- **Obama elected:** Obama's election has created a more open conversation about race. His election took the engagement of the youth. The Obama administration inspired international hope for change and hope.
- **Increased interconnectedness between countries** and put an international pressure on the US to change its ways.
- **Civic engagement looks different:** Civic engagement, especially among youth, has become more positive and action driven.
- **Electronic connections are replacing personal connections:** Facebook (social networking site) is adding 350 people per hour while the FNS has only 350 people total.
- **Increasing threat to humans and to the planet:** The positive is with the increased threat comes a mainstream acceptance of global warming as well as an increase in the use of alternative energies and building more sustainable organizations.
- **Proliferation of whole scale change methodologies:** People's connection to the core principles of the Future Search process are getting lost, however the value of the process is increasing. There is more competition and more mixing and matching of various large group methods.
- **Troubled economy:** US unemployment rates are increasing which can be looked at as an increasing resource of untapped workers. With the economic downturn there has been an increased amount of crime and poverty. The opportunity is the Obama administration is issuing the stimulus package, which will provide funding for infrastructure projects and provide jobs for many people throughout the country.

- **Media polarizing issues and looking for disagreements:** Bad news is known to sell. Meanwhile, many media outlets are going out of business and shutting their doors. Much of this is due to the increase in the use of online/free media sources.
- **Realization that individual priorities are impacting new communities:** increasing trend toward re-localization.
- **There is less of a tendency to follow experts.**
- **Increased acceptance of government involvement:** public and private partnerships are becoming more common.

FOCUS ON THE PRESENT
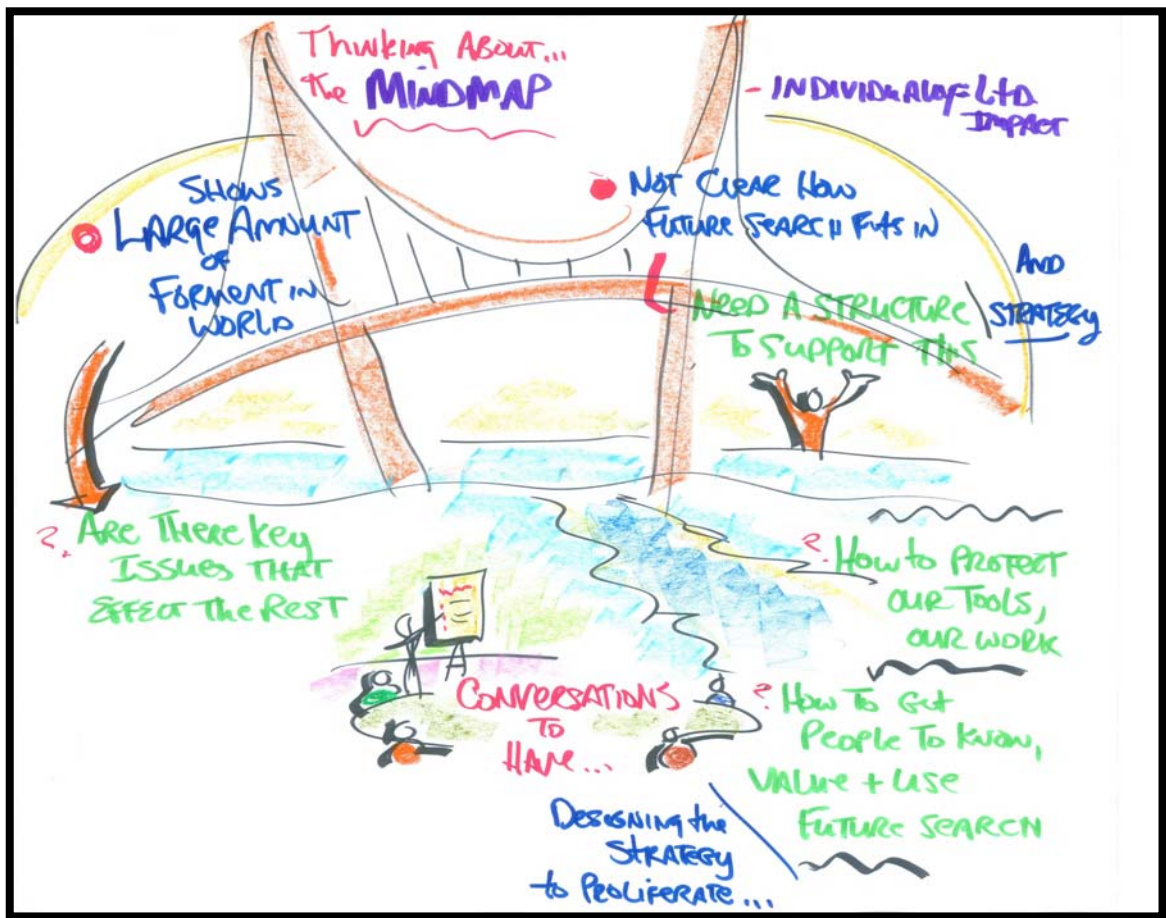
FOCUS ON THE PRESENT

How Trends Affect the System

Participants were assigned stakeholder groups to represent. The stakeholder groups assigned were: government, education, community, technology and FSN members and users. The different groups worked to discover stakeholders' core concerns and identified what people are doing now and what they should do in the future. Groups worked to determine the few key trends (three to five) of greatest concern to each stakeholder category.

> **Each group answered:**
> (1) What is currently being done to respond to these trends?
> (2) What should be done differently in the future?

All groups reported back from their stakeholder perspectives. The large group then reflected on how the key trends will affect the FSN.

The Current State

- People report it is very hard to get connected into the Future Search Network.
- Future Search is a process that works. When a community sees common ground and shared purpose they see opportunities to change.
- The problem with Future Search is that it can not be shortened or compressed.
- Many people within the Network have built a container for Future Search.
- This method has already gone all over the world without push back.
- There is a discrepancy between the process design and bringing the process to the world.

The Future of Future Search

- Need to be cautious that Future Search is not to be a solution looking for a problem. If it is sold or pushed on people too much it will become part of the problem.
- Getting Future Search out in the world will require a request or willingness and interest on the part of participants.
- Participation and buy into the Future Search method will require education.
- What is the future beyond Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff?
- Need to have discussion about what needs to stay in Future Search and what needs to change.

FOCUS ON THE PRESENT

"Prouds and Sorries"

Take Forward – Leave Behind

To grow, it is important to build on the strengths of the Network without being weighed down by the legacy of past missteps. Participants reported on strengths and accomplishments they are proud of from their stakeholder perspectives or their "prouds." They also reported on the decisions that did not turn out as well as expected that need to be left behind or their "sorries." The purpose of the "Prouds and Sorries" exercise is to own up to current actions and take responsibility in moving forward.

Technology Group (FSN and technology)

> **Prouds:** Together FSN members have a lot of knowledge. Matching 25K grant to update the book.
> **Sorries:** The FSN is not caught up with Web 2.0.

The FSN should use tools like social networking sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Ning.com. The Network needs more tech-savvy people and should hire an administrator to manage technology and marketing. In the interim the Network should conduct short-term experiments as risk is low. There should also be an E-version of newsletter.

FSN Group

> **Prouds:** The Network exists and engages so many different people from different continents.
> **Sorries:** There is not enough outreach to new members. Not having more up to date website.

The world is becoming more high-tech, how can the FSN become more global and more engaging? Active members from years ago are beginning to disengage; the FSN needs to become a new organization in light of the core group not being around. The FSN should take advantage of the opportunities for participation that globalization will create. Currently, new members are not being effectively engaged. The website is confusing and not up to date. There is competition among the different large group methods, the FSN should find ways to collaborate.

Education Group

> **Prouds:** The current education system does not support the way that the world should go.
> **Sorries:** The Future Search method would inspire a meaningful dialogue but other solutions are necessary and could be more effective at fixing the system.

In the current system prizes are given to best debater and not the best problem-solver, there is a focus on winning and listening is not enough of an emphasis. Children should be taught to engage in dialogue when they have problems. In order to get there the first dialogue should include the communities, school boards, teachers, and children. Future Search should be used once a year to bring school superintendents together to reflect on inclusive processes that are changing things in their schools, then listening and learn without challenging each other.

Government Group

> **Prouds:** Government is beginning to look at problems from whole system perspective.
>
> **Sorries:** That the whole system approach did not begin sooner. The group regrets government does not speak more about truth to power and that people often make negative comments about government without having constructive solutions.

Government silos should talk before they get to implementation. Silos can be internal to the agency, across agency and across sectors. Government should talk to stakeholders; Future Search is one method to do so. Systems should be allowed to fail. Studies should be conducted to show the cost of business as usual compared to the cost of change. Change is scary but fear of failure can be a motivator. Dialogue should start from interest-based negotiation rather than positions; oftentimes people are not aware of their interests and operate from positions. Early intervention should identify those interests so that people do not waste time arguing. Conducting an assessment before entering a process will help identify where people are operating, and how to engage them.

Community Group

> **Prouds:** Communities are doing work with international youth and neighborhood empowerment.
>
> **Sorries:** Macro community peace-building is hard to achieve. An economically viable way to do community work has not been identified.

Talk about differences instead of ignoring them. There are effective big group processes available, neighborhoods and communities should be involved in the work. Future Search endeavors should be conducted in the physical neighborhoods where people are living. Community people should get together to find common ground and build a vision for their neighborhood, then they could become ambassadors for those neighborhoods and connect with others.

FOCUS ON THE PRESENT

DESIRED FUTURE SCENARIOS

The purpose of the desired future scenarios is for participants to imagine a future they are willing to work toward. Participants were asked to put themselves 15 years into the future.

Participants were asked to imagine that today is March 31, 2025. They were to then visualize what is happening in the world and prepare a skit demonstrating how the dreams of over 15 years have become a reality.

Participants were asked to record the following on flip charts
- What is life like today?
- Describe notable policies, programs, and structures that exist now.
- How is progress sustained?
- Think back to the year of the Future Search (2009). What was the biggest barrier to overcome to get moving?
- How was this progress accomplished?

Participants next chose a **CREATIVE** way to present their desired future as if it were happening right NOW (drama, story, poem, music, art, internet, anything goes).

Scenarios should be:
- **Feasible** – The know-how exists to implement it.
- **Desirable** – Society benefits.
- **Motivating** - You have worked hard to make it happen.

DESIRED FUTURE SCENARIOS

DISCOVERING COMMON GROUND

After listening to the desired future scenarios, groups were asked to list common ground elements that reflects *what* people here want now and in the future. These elements could include values, policies, programs, and procedures to be designed. These are the "minimum critical specifications" for the new direction.

After discussion in stakeholder groups, the large group came back together. The first group reported their common ground elements which were each recorded on separate flip charts. As each additional group reported back, related common ground themes were grouped on existing flip charts, with new flip charts created for new themes not related those already mentioned. As a group, participants decided where each theme fell and how it related to those already mentioned. The process was comparable to an affinity map exercise.

Usually the whole group would revisit the common ground for as long as it takes to come to agreement and items that are not accepted by all members would be moved to the **Not Agreed** list. Time restrictions did no allow for this step of the process.
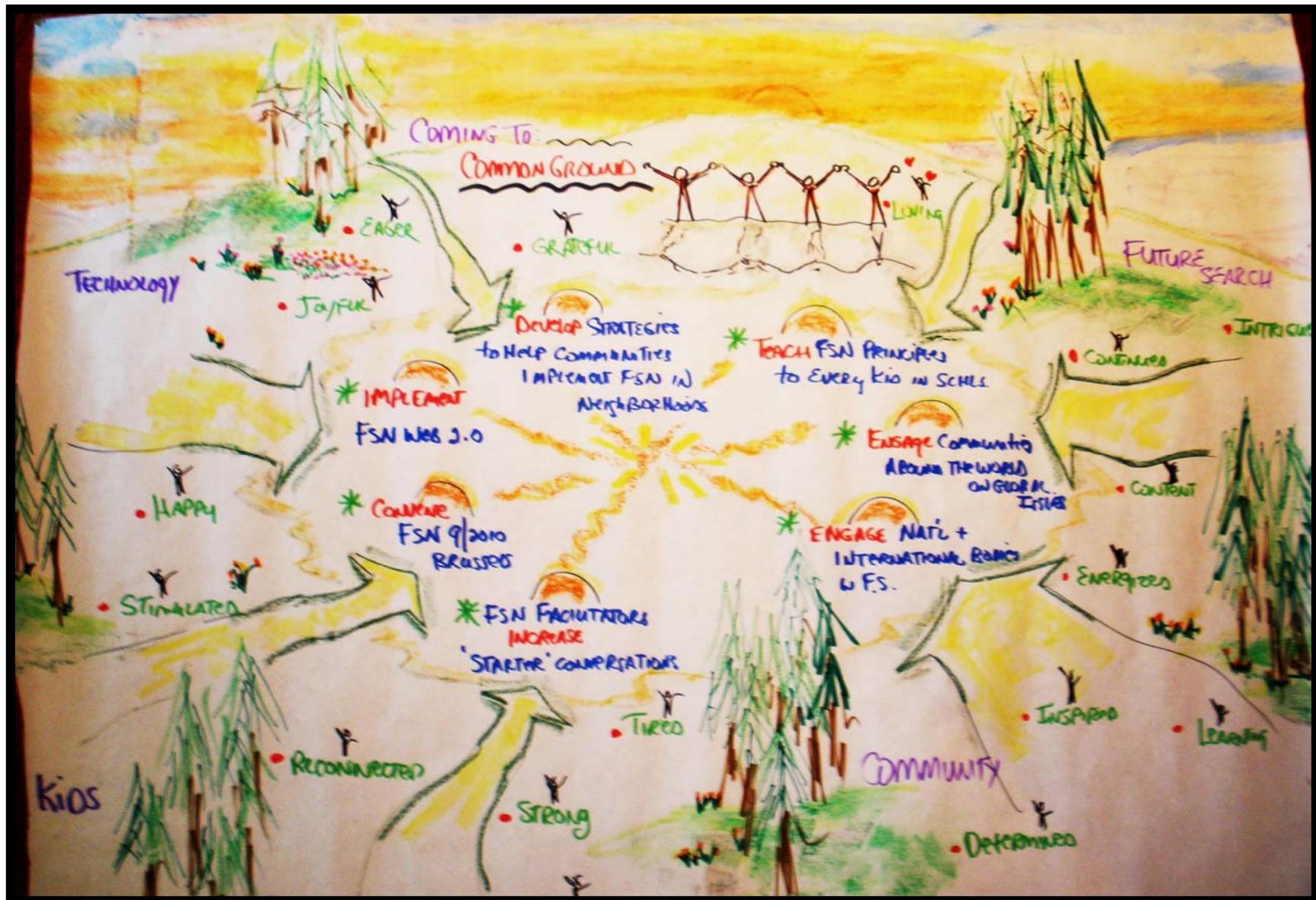
Common Ground Themes

- The FSN is a model for the use of electronic technology as an enabler for connecting people throughout the world to support the Network's growth and vitality.

- The FSN is leveraging the power of Future Search and the energy of its members to engage people and communities all over the world to make progress on the issues that are most critical to their survival and the survival of the planet, including peace between nations, economic equality and environmental preservation.

- Future Search is positioned in the top tier of large group methods and has a good relationship and collaborates with other large group methods.

- Communities have internalized the principles and value capacity inherent in Future Search and practice the principles and values of inclusion.

- In several counties there is an established procedure to have regular Future Searches to collect the people's voices for national policies.

- Future Search engages with Obama's priorities to find a proactive way to promote facilitating conversations and collaboration.

- Every child in school learns to use the principles underlying Future Search in order to be equipped to address complex social situations. This should be modeled by adults (teachers and parents) in schools through making decisions about curriculum, teaching approaches and educational goals using the Future Search process.

- The FSN is a robust network virtually growing and highly interactive using multiple media outlets and forums. There is a regular and ongoing dialogue. People freely share information through technology. The FSN has a broad and diversified membership.

- Trained Future Search practitioners facilitate the number of conversations about improving the current state, identifying opportunities for conducting Future Searchers by learning and applying skills to facilitate the preliminary conversations to arrive at needs.

- An organization, system or process exists to support the preliminary conversations and readily matches ideal facilitators with energized clients.

- FSN leverages its organization and connections to proactively engage national and international bodies to facilitate collaborative conversations about important issues. Example: (1) establish a plan to work with the Obama administration to collect people's voices about national policies (2) hold FSN sessions in every county across the country.

GROUP ACTION PLANNING

> **Purpose:** To identify short and long term action steps. What are steps *participants* will take RIGHT NOW toward the common ground agenda?

Action Planning Commitments

- We commit to using Web 2.0, social networking sites, creating an electronic newsletter and keeping relevant websites up to date.

- We commit to using technology to math practitioners with cases to conduct Future Searches.

- We commit ourselves to organizing the next Future Search Learning Exchange in Brussels September 2010.

- We commit to develop strategies to engage and encourage communities in implementing Future Search principles in their neighborhood. We will develop legislation for establishing citywide networks of neighborhood assemblies operating on Future Search principles (and models to scale it up). We will develop a similar approach that can be implemented by non-profit to proliferate such efforts.

- We commit to work with Future Search leaders to contact people in the Obama administration.

- We commit to creating a FSN starter kit to enable communities to hold FSN sessions.

- We commit to tell friends who are working on the issues that are most critical to the world's survival about Feature Search.

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