

An extract from Playing with Time.

Outside Time and Space: Earth, Fire, and Water

A Preface: Introducing Core Elements - an homage to Terry Pratchett, the preface introduces the Weaver, Jester, Gardener, and Sailor to guide the reader through the complexities of foresight and transformation

It was, perhaps, outside of ordinary time and space that the meeting began, as most important ones do. Here, beyond the edges of familiar reality, a motley crew had gathered, each bearing a distinct quality, a craft, a way of being. There was no formal invitation — only the gentle, insistent tug of an idea, whispered on a breeze that seemed to come from nowhere in particular. And so, they arrived, in their ways and forms, each carrying something: a spark, a seed, a gem. They were gathered to discuss how to carry these fragile, essential treasures forward — and how, by doing so, they might steer the course of entire futures.

The Weaver spoke first, her fingers forever busy with strands of possibility, her voice like silk but strong as a spider's web. "We are not here to follow the pattern of the past," she began, eyes sharp and bright. "Instead, we are here to spin a fabric of futures — not yet woven, but waiting. Each thread a choice, each knot a transformation." She gave a nod toward the reader who had somehow found their way to this strange gathering. "You, too, are part of the weave, my friend. Every thought, every decision, adds to the tapestry. This book is our loom, and together, we will twist and bind threads that span beyond any single life."

Next to speak was the Jester, dressed in colors that didn't seem quite of this world. His eyes glinted with mischief, and he held a staff with a bauble that looked suspiciously like a compass — if compasses laughed and muttered strange things. "Oh, make no mistake!" he laughed, his grin wide. "This isn't some staid, quiet manual for future-planning. No, no. We are playing with time itself. Imagine! Imagine the audacity! A book that invites you not just to read, but to dance, to tumble, to subvert the very rules you thought you knew. It's all a bit silly, of course — but don't you see? It's only through a bit of silliness that you find truth hiding, giggling, in the corner."

The Gardener looked up from his earthy patch in the corner, hands dusted with soil, eyes thoughtful. "For truth does not only reside in words, you see," he added quietly. "Truth lives in the seeds, in what we choose to cultivate. Each choice we make, each life we nurture, becomes part of the landscape of our shared future. And we must plant with intention, water with hope, and have patience for what will one day grow. This is no quick fix, no snap solution. It is a craft, a stewardship. If you're reading this, you are a gardener too, and you carry seeds within you that could grow into forests."

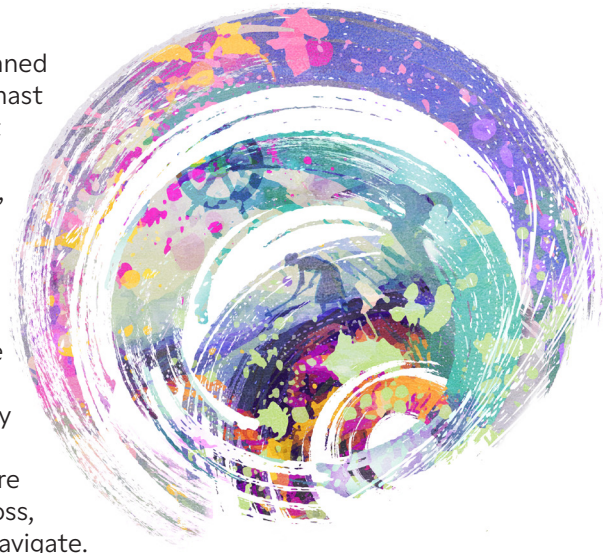
The Sailor leaned against the mast of a ship that hadn't yet found its sea, compass in hand. "And yet," he said, voice as steady as the horizon, "we cannot simply plant and wait. There are oceans to cross, currents to navigate.

This book," he nodded, eyes meeting the reader's, "it is a kind of map, but a strange one. It will lead you through fogs and storms, over reefs and under constellations. You must learn to consult it not as an answer, but as a companion. Trust not only the stars but the movement of the sea beneath you. There will be moments when you won't know the way — but that is when the journey truly begins."

Beyond these four, a host of others hovered, each embodying an element of the path to come. The Firegatherer moved carefully, holding an ember that never went out, a flame drawn from an ancient source and meant to ignite new fires in distant places. She met the reader's eye, held the ember forward, and smiled. "You and I," she whispered, "are like the Pikunii, the ancient firecarriers. I hold the spark, and you hold the horn. Together, we carry it — to communities, to the hearts and hearths of those ready to warm themselves by the fire. It is a thing that grows as we share it, and that's why you, dear reader, are needed. Without you, the fire stays small. With you, it grows, catching and kindling until it is a blaze."

At the edge of this circle, another figure chipped away at the earth, an Artisanal Miner, his hands rough and his gaze focused. He was patient, sifting through stone to find gems, polishing them, setting them in the places they belonged. He, too, met the reader's gaze, holding up a stone that sparkled in the strange, timeless light. "This book," he said, "is a mine, and you are invited to sift and dig, to unearth the insights that suit you best. Take them as they are, or polish them until they gleam. Set them in the designs of your own choosing, for each discovery is yours to keep, to share, to build upon."

And then, as if the scene itself were alive, the Weaver wove a thread around each character, binding them into a circle that pulsed with a life of its own. She extended the thread to the reader, gently pulling them closer. "This is not a book you read once and set aside," she said, her voice both kind and insistent. "It is a seedbank, a place where the past, present, and future mingle. Here, you may choose your seeds — ideas, inspirations, tiny kernels of change. Plant them in your life, test them in your soil, see what takes root. And know that you are part of a much larger garden."



The Jester, grinning, gave a bow. “And when you find yourself lost — which you will — take heart! For here be dragons, my friend. Dragons and fogs and ancient maps. You will need courage and a bit of whimsy. Trust the whirlpool, the pull of the unknown. This is a journey through ideas as much as through yourself. And when you stumble, remember: sometimes falling over is the first step to learning to dance.”

In the center of them all, amniotic fluid swirled, thick with potential. The figures in this space of not-yet-birth leaned in as if listening to the murmur of unborn futures, possibilities swirling like fish in dark water. Each character dipped a hand into this liquid, pulling forth a snatch of a story, a hint of an idea. They gathered these together, shaping them, passing them to the Weaver who deftly spun them into a form that felt both strange and familiar.

“This book,” the Gardener added, looking to the reader, “is an act of cultivation. You are a steward of futures, called to choose what grows, what is tended, and what, eventually, is harvested. Here, we do not race forward blindly, nor do we cling to what was. We play with time. We subvert its rules, stepping lightly across boundaries, listening to the wisdom of the past, dreaming of what could be. And in that playfulness, in that choice, is where hope resides.”

With that, the figures fell silent, each resting in the stillness, letting their words find their place. The Firegatherer’s ember glowed, the Miner’s gem sparkled, the Gardener held a seed, the Sailor steadied his compass, and the Jester laughed softly to himself. They looked to the reader with a shared question, as if to ask: What will you make of this? How will you carry these fragments, these seeds, these sparks, into your own life? And, above all, are you ready to embark on a journey that will ask much of you, but offer something precious in return?

Outside time and space, the book awaited, alive with stories, potential, and transformation. All it needed was a reader, willing to play with time.



Invitation: Please share your stories or signals from your community.

Share plans/asks/offers: what you would like to do or need to take forward the ideas (manifesto) from ideas and commitments from paper to application and practice.

Be part of the ongoing conversation through the substack or book club playingwithtime.substack.com

Outline for the Book

Preamble

- Outside time and space
- Urgency and why written
- Difficulty of writing this book about a practice for midwifing new and hospice-caring the old
- The response is a book both playful and deeply serious
- An apology, a commitment and a request
- Why do I care
- Exercises for the reader

In the face of complex and urgent challenges -and opportunities

- A growing call to respond with long-term thinking and action
- The time is ripe to respond at scale
- Using futures thinking to enshrine the wellbeing of current and future generations is a post-Polycrisis narrative and Northstar principle
- But there is a major dilemma
- Exercises for the reader

Introducing the Foresight and Futures field

- Learning from the past, shaping the future - introducing the field and discipline of foresight
- Reasons for adopting a Foresight approach - why it’s useful and attractive in these times
- Looking backwards and forwards to learn from the foresight field at this moment of need
- But key limitations with the field need addressing
- SOIF’s purpose has been to convene collectively to fix them
- So this book is a Gaia story about what we have learnt together
- Caution, Offer and Invitation
- Exercises for the reader.

The Whirlpool and the Prism

- Introducing the Whirlpool: the challenge, timeline and origins and turbulence of the whirlpool
- Mindset level: uncertainty and agency, building our mindset, drilling down and key benefits
- Intervention level: designing effective foresight interventions, scoping and integrating futures.
- System level: the technocratic, participatory and accountability components; and how to take an ecosystem approach that is dynamic and indivisible
- Exercises for the reader

The Journey ahead

- Let’s reconnect to why this is important
- Strengthening the foresight community
- A timeline for action
- How to continue being part of the movement
- A final manifesto
- The characters say Au Revoir
- Exercises for the reader

Resources