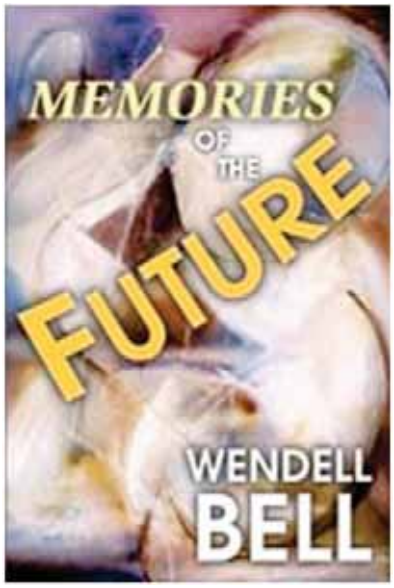

Why Do People Write Memoirs? By Wendell Bell

I didn't think much about why people write memoirs until I was mostly finished writing *Memories of the Future*. Rather, I had some stories that I wanted to share about becoming a World War II Navy pilot, a sociologist, a teacher, a Caribbeanist, a Yale professor in a period of change, an equestrian, and a futurist, illustrating how images of the future, as well as chance, can shape the arc of a life.

What I was writing, though, sometimes surprised me. Although still focused on past visions and hopes for the future, it also became a journey of self-discovery. Thus, I sought guidance from others, casting a wide net into the general category of "memoir writing" beyond the contemporary works I had already read, such as those by sociologists Edward Shils (*A Fragment of a Sociological Autobiography*), George C. Homans (*Coming to My Senses*), and Irving L. Horowitz (*Daydreams and Nightmares*), as well as collections of shorter pieces in books edited by Bennett M. Berger (*Authors of Their Own Lives: Intellectual Autobiographies by Twenty American Sociologists*) and Horowitz (*Sociological Self-Images: A Collective Portrait*).

"Memoirs," I discovered, are far from being a homogeneous category. Rather, according to one writer or another, they are sometimes justifications of the author's existence, coming-clean confessionals that bare the soul, self-congratulatory victory laps of achievement and success, sexual boastings, or defenses of a style of life ranging from mildly perverse to wild and dangerous.

Some memoirs are collected anecdotes (what did Disraeli call that certain period of life, "anecdotage"?). Others are searching introspections, simple and honest presentations of the author's achievements and flaws (I have plenty of the latter, but I tried not to dwell on them), surprising revelations of self-knowledge that the author discovers as he or she writes, a way to settle scores (punish abusers, get revenge for evil harms done to the author), a lofty effort to teach others how better to live their lives, a way to explain the end of illusion or hope, or, especially for the very old or the terminally ill, descriptions of waiting for death to come.

Although there may be a bit of each of the above in *Memories of the Future*, when I returned to my writing, I found that one major thread in what I had written was gratitude, a feeling of gratefulness toward many people whose kindness, concern, advice, protection, encouragement, understanding, teachings, and help at one point or another in my journey had made life and learning, love and hope possible for me. Starting with my mother and grandmother, who raised me, and adding my teachers, friends, colleagues, wife, and children—and sometimes complete strangers, such as a man in a passing car who saw me trapped by a vicious dog when I was a kid selling magazines door-to-door and who stopped and saved me.

Thus, I tried to capture in *Memories of the Future* the wonder of the basic decency of most people in the world by giving some specific examples. Especially in face-to-face situations, most people do not want to harm others. Rather, they want to be fair and just, honest, cooperative, friendly, helpful, generous, understanding, and respectful. And, when they fail to act decently, it is often not because they are personifications of evil, but rather because they are thoughtless, unwise, misguided, or the real or imagined victims of others. This is not to say that mean and angry people do not exist. Of course they do. But some of them need understanding more than condemnation, a hug more than a kick.

In *Memories of the Future* I try to complete this thread by tying it to the concept of image of the future and to actions designed to create a desirable future in an effort, lofty or not, to contribute something that might help people lead more satisfying lives and make the world a better place.

One part of that effort is to recognize that even in our corporate, global society, each one of us in our ordinary daily lives possesses a powerful means to affect the future. Each of us human beings constitutes part of the world—even if only some small slice of it—for those people with whom we share our lives, from our infant children and other family members to friends, neighbors, co-workers, and beyond them to others with whom we have but fleeting contacts, such as waitresses and store clerks—even a customer service worker speaking to us on the telephone from India or the Philippines. These are the people with whom we personally interact.

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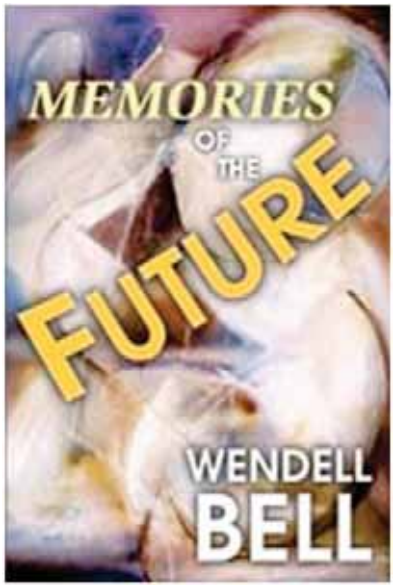
Books of Interest *(Continued)*



(Continued from previous page...) Although we ordinary people have little control of the actions of nations and transnational corporations or of the momentous events of history, we can control ourselves. Thus, we individuals can control how we treat other people. We possess the power to create a new future of dignity, self-restraint, empathy, fairness, honesty, trustworthiness, inclusiveness, generosity, and nonviolence for each person with whom we personally interact by how we treat them. You can do it and I can do it. For within that limited band of the lives of others that we each constitute, by our own behavior toward others we can create a small piece of the good society for them that we hope will become the future.

Such behavior on our part is not mere selfless altruism, because what goes around comes around. As we humans act, we create some part of the world, not only for others but also for ourselves.

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Book Description: ***Memories of the Future***

Life courses, both professional and personal, are often directed by unplanned experiences. At crossroads, which path is followed and which hard choices are made can change the direction of one's future. Wendell Bell's life illustrates how totally unforeseen events can shape individual lives. As he notes, despite our hopes and our plans for the future, there is also serendipity, feedback, twists and turns, chance and circumstance, all of which shape our futures with sometimes surprising results. In Bell's case, such twists and turns of chance and circumstance led to his role in developing the new field of futures studies.

In *Memories of the Future*, Bell recognizes the importance of images of the future and the effect of these images on events to come. Such images—dreams, visions, or whatever we call them—help to determine our actions, which, in turn, help shape the future, although not always in ways that we intend. Bell illustrates, partly with the story of his own life, how people remember such past images of the future and how the memories of them linger and are often used to judge the real outcomes of their lives.

This is a fascinating view of the work of an important social scientist and the people and events that helped define his life. It is also about American higher education, especially from the end of World War II through the 1960s and 1970s, a period of educational transformation that included the spread of the merit system; the increase in ethnic, racial, gender, and social diversity among students and faculty; and a massive increase in research and knowledge.

Wendell Bell

Wendell Bell is professor emeritus of sociology at Yale University, where he also served as chair of the department. Bell has written more than two hundred articles and authored or co-authored numerous books, including *Social Area Analysis, Public Leadership*, and *Foundations of Futures Studies* (two volumes, available from Transaction).

http://www.transactionpub.com/title/Memories-of%20the%20Future-978-1-4128-4262-4.html