What is going on in the world today? There are many answers to this question. It is my opinion that it is time to revisit two books that had a profound effect on me and still have relevance today. When their major ideas are merged, they provide a conceptual approach to better understand our social and psychological state today. Published in 1970, Future Shock chronicled the psychological reaction to being overwhelmed by the future: too much significant change too fast. The author believed the accelerated rate and size of technological and social change left people disconnected and suffering from "shattering stress and disorientation"—future shocked. The book was written by Alvin Toffler, a self-trained futurist and successful freelance magazine writer. He foresaw the emergence of a new society—the information society—and the development of cloning, the popularity and influence of personal computers, and the invention of the Internet, cable television and telecommuting. He was among the first authors to recognize that knowledge, not just labor and raw materials, would become the most important economic resource of advanced societies. He coined the phrase “information overload.” Toffler died this past June at age 87.

Future shock is not limited to the macro trends of the 1960’s or constrained to technological and societal trends, although “societal” can be stretched to include political, demographic, economic and environmental trends. Toffler provides for us a timeless lens to view the stress and disorientation of too much large-scale change too fast, and our reactions to it. Battling the overwhelming complexity, speed and content of change requires learning, unlearning and relearning. Futures fitness (literacy) is resilience grounded in values, shaped by curiosity and fueled by the need for growth and development. Future illiteracy stunts personal and societal growth and development as our old learnings fail in the face of new realities.

The future that is racing at us is challenging our institutions, social relationships and the fabric of our thinking and behavior. This future includes:

- The emergence of new economic and political powers such as China.
- A more complex and volatile Middle East.
- New terrorist threats from non-traditional enemies such as ISIS and home grown terrorists.
- Cold War-like saber rattling among world powers.
- Demographic changes due to birth rates and the migration of vast numbers of refugees from war-torn countries into or societies.
• Volatile police community relations in the US.
• Globalization of the Internet and social media.
• Brexit and the future of the EU, NATO and other international alliances and trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership.
• Global warming.

Future shock is again a reality for us. Here is a short list of the symptoms and remedies for the stress and disorientation associated with it.

Future Illiteracy and Prejudice. When our future literacy (acumen) is strong, we are challenged, but not shocked by the future and are open to exploring new ideas and possibilities. When our future literacy is weak, we resort back to old notions and either reject or resist new ideas. Our stress and shock increases because old notions (prejudgments) do not always solve new dilemmas; they can further exacerbate them. Harvard psychology professor Gordon Allport, in his book, *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), was one of the first authors to talk about the normal function of the human brain and its need to categorize things as a basis of prejudice. While he talked poignantly about racial prejudice, his theory is generalizable to all social and psychological issues which are fundamentally new and foreign to us. Prejudice is not just about race. It is any form of prejudgment. Those with strong categories fight new information rather than reformating their categories to include the new reality or possibility. When the issue is a future trend, we can have preconceived ideas about the issue or its ramifications and prejudge it. Take, for example, ISIS and other terrorist groups. These groups are not traditional nation-state armies with one national, centralized, hierarchical organizational structure and leader like Russia, North Korea or Iran. They are segmented, polycentric organizations organized around ideologies and connected in networks that span traditional national boundaries. Eliminating Al Qaeda or ISIS doesn’t stop the terrorist threat, it just eliminates a part of the movement and another networked organization with a similar ideology takes its place. Therefore, to better understand terrorism and how to defeat it, we must think outside of our traditional categories about enemies and how they are organized. It is important to defeat ISIS but we must also disrupt their networks, better understand the sources of the ideology and degrade the ideologists. It is more complex than merely bombing the most ruthless current group operating from conventional warfare prejudices.

Isolation vs. Connecting. Fear is a common emotion when we are faced with the stress and disorientation of future shock. A behavior associated with fear is to withdraw from the situation and, in theory, reduce the anxiety. However, isolating oneself from the trends that cause stress and disorientation avoids the creative tension that exists between our current view and perhaps producing a new point of view, restructuring our conceptual categories. Isolation hardens the categories of our prejudgment. In addition, when we isolate ourselves individually or
collectively, we often build stories of those who are on the other side of our isolation that enhance fear of them. Developing acumen about the future involves weighing the risks and rewards of reaching across conceptual and behavior boundaries and choosing to act beyond our current prejudices. This can lead to growth and development. Growing up during the desegregation movement in the US, my generation was constantly fed stereotyped information about Blacks by parents and the media that caused us to fear and avoid Blacks. This prejudice cracked for me when I went to high school and met a few Black students and two very influential Black teachers. Inviting my ninth grade, Black, Christian Brother religion teacher home for dinner in my all white neighborhood caused quite a stir. My fear and avoidance had given way to appreciation and respect as I worked with these two gifted teachers. And, for whatever reason, I chose to break my family and my neighborhood’s isolation at least for one evening. The teacher and I laughed about it afterwards. Our isolation was turning to connecting. We need to fight the reaction to the future we call isolation and instead reach out to get to a new place.

**Projection vs. Owning.** A common defense mechanism associated with future shock is psychological projection. Projection is a theory in which humans defend themselves against their own unconscious impulses or prejudices by denying their existence in themselves while attributing them to others. Projecting our insecurities, fears and prejudices onto others can take the form of blaming others. An example can include saying the other person looked like they were reaching for a weapon, so I shot them in my own defense. The characterization of the other as dangerous or threatening may be grounded in a prejudicial belief if the shooter is a police officer and the target is a young Black male or if the attacker is a community member and the target is a police officer. Notice the similarity of the projection process in these two examples. I have this concern about projection when I read about many altercations between police officers and young black males across our country today as well as between community members and the police. The future shock here has to do with the perceived threat of more violence and unrest in our cities (like the 60’s) fueled by racism and the increased presence of guns, especially military-style assault weapons. It seems to me to be a hopeless cycle of violence. Blaming the victim as a result of projection also happens in situations of sexual harassment, and less provocative/newsworthy human interactions. Students and parents, for example, often blame the school or the teacher for the lack of performance of their child, when some or much of the blame should be owned by the parents and the students. Owning one’s prejudgment involves understanding the source of the stress and discomfort and being capable of not reacting to it, possibly doing something life changing in an emotionally charged instant that all will regret. Owning means reordering your assumptions and conceptual categories and trying new behaviors.

**Pessimism vs. Optimism.** It is difficult to maintain optimism about the future when your perceptions about normalcy are being crushed by the future. Shock can be debilitating for a time. However, realizing that we humans have overcome a history of fundamental societal and technological shifts proves our resilience. Significant change has faced each generation. Working
through the waves of change that we have spun is what life, in part, is about. Approaching it as an adventure full of challenges and the opportunity to grow is at the heart of successful change.

Be aware that people may attempt to take advantage of your future shock to recruit you to their ideology or make sure that you stick to your current path. Our times are ripe for this type of recruiting from political, religious and social groups both domestic and international. We are vulnerable when we are distressed, fearful and pessimistic. As the Brits say, “Keep calm and carry on.” *Keep Calm and Carry On* was a motivational poster produced by the British government in 1939 in preparation for World War II. The poster was intended to raise the morale of the British public, threatened with widely predicted mass air attacks on major cities. I recently received a birthday card with this motto on it with a note about the future and the onslaught of age. It reminded me of the reality of the aging process with some added humor. Because it came from someone 16 years my senior, it also reassured me that I was on the right path.

**Futures Acumen.** Thinking outside of the box (categories) can be more than a cliché. Know the premises on which you base your understanding of future issues. You can start to get a better understanding by reflecting on the stress and disorientation you feel in the face of the future and attempt to trace its origin. This means becoming more conscious of what you believe in and why rather than simply reacting to the future. Changing your categories in light of every new challenge is not the point. In the final analysis, you may stick with your framework. Making it a more rational decision than an unconscious belief or reaction is a part of your futures acumen. Be curious and exploratory in your thinking and actions. Don’t brush aside new information as irrelevant or resort to simple solutions for complex problems. Become more suspect of those who wish to have you brush aside the facts and complexity and sell you fear, reaction, prejudice and simple, old solutions. This makes things worse, not better. Hang out with people with strong futures acumen. Finally, our actions in terms of the future should be based on our values. If we value openness, dignity, respect, growth and hope, we will approach the challenges of the future confidently as a challenge rather than with fear, blame and foreboding.

**Lessons Learned:**

1. Know the future issues that cause consternation for you and why.
2. Increase your understanding of the nature of prejudice (prejudgment) as it applies to current situations, but also more broadly to possible future situations.
3. Remember that when you are suffering the fear, disorientation and pessimism that can accompany future shock that you put yourself at risk of being exploited.
4. Update your assumptions and conceptual categories to grow with the challenges the future brings.
5. Keep calm and carry on!