

The Future Isn't What It Used to Be

Exploring Possibility, Curiosity, and the Practice of Strategic Foresight

By Kelly Nutty

As a lifelong lover of literature, one of my favorite quotes is “I dwell in Possibility,” the first line of a poem by Emily Dickinson with the same name¹. The poem is an exploration and celebration of poetry, itself. It reveals poetry as expansive and imaginative, full of wonder and possibility. It's an ode to creativity, unbound from conformity. And lately, I've realized it's also an accidental ode to *strategic foresight*. Emily may have been talking about poetry, but she was also describing the very mindset foresight requires: a willingness to imagine what could be, not just what is. Emily Dickinson would have made a fine futurist.

I'm drawn to this particular poem above all of Emily Dickinson's works perhaps because it shares so much emotion so quickly and directly. Since I became a fan of this poem, and of Emily herself, decades ago, I have expanded its meaning past poetry and into my own being. I do dwell in possibility. My brain works on overtime (whether good, bad, or neutral), thinking, scenario planning, and walking down possible paths in my mind. I've cultivated an innate curiosity for all things that is one of the greatest reasons for my personal joy. Just like Emily's ode to poetry, I share that my life is expansive and imaginative, full of wonder and possibility. It is, thankfully, safe from conformity.

The Importance of Being Curious²

I am a huge advocate for being curious. For someone like me, whose mind is always on, being curious has given my mind an opportunity to focus on positivity, solve challenges, and open up new possibilities in my life.

In the last few years, I began to get more curious about my curiosity. Is curiosity a matter of nature or nurture? Let's consider the context. I am practiced and professional at turning over rocks. I never resist what's beneath the surface. I was the kid who asked “why?” about everything. In law school, I sat in the front row in most classes, and I visited my professors during their office hours to ask detailed “why” questions about their lectures. As a litigation attorney, I turned over paper rocks, which often meant a thousand or more boxes of construction project documents, to find the facts for my clients.

As an attorney, law firm life seemed to be about two things: billing hours and winning. Not bad things. But not enough for me. I secretly volunteered in my community. On Saturday mornings, before the inevitable endless weekend work, I stole away to the homeless shelter in my community. I spent a couple of hours anonymously, not as an attorney, but as a job coach. I helped adults experiencing homelessness create resumes, apply for jobs, practice for job interviews, and get clothes for the first day of their new jobs.

In 2011, my husband received a promotion and transfer to Wisconsin, so we packed up our life in Northern Virginia and moved to a state I had only ever flown over. My curiosity peaked again. In Appleton, I leaned into volunteering to build community and find my footing. While my husband started his new role, I gave myself three months to get settled and job hunt, which, for me, meant rolling up my sleeves. I volunteered at a

¹ The full poem, written in 1890, can be found at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52197/i-dwell-in-possibility-466>.

² *The Importance of Being Earnest*, by Oscar Wilde (1895) is a play that is described by the author as being a “trivial comedy for serious people.” It's a satirical look at upper-class Victorian Society, where curiosity drives two young men to “Bunbury” their way into alternate futures. An early case for strategic foresight, if you will.

homeless shelter as a job coach and helped construct a greenhouse so residents could learn to grow and prepare vegetables.

As I began interviewing, two possibilities emerged: a corporate legal position (if you are a fan of strategic foresight, this is the baseline future), and an opening at the shelter for a young adult case manager (the transformational future). The shelter interview wasn't what I expected. I dressed down one of my legal suits and met the director, who had a last-minute donation pickup. Part one of the interview took place in her farm truck that smelled of hay and wet dog; part two happened as we loaded a couch into the truck bed. I was hooked. I called the corporate recruiter to withdraw and accepted the shelter job, my first official step from law to nonprofit work.

Curiosity and possibility at work, as usual. This story leads us to the big question: is curiosity based on nature or nurture? Not surprisingly, the answer is both. Indeed, such a lawyer answer.

According to Justin James Kennedy, D.Prof, in his article *The Psychology and Neuroscience of Curiosity* (Psychology Today, 11/9/2023),³ curiosity is part of who we are, and it is woven from both our genes and the world that shapes us. It's not a simple tug-of-war between nature and nurture, but a dance between the two. That spark that makes us wonder "why?" or "what if?" is what propels us toward discovery of possibility.

It makes sense that the more I feed my curiosity by asking questions, paying attention, and following my fascinations, the brighter my curiosity burns. When I connect my passions with what I don't understand, curiosity leads me to growth, insight, and delight. Ultimately, the answer is that I was born with some undetermined level of curiosity, and that my curiosity exponentially grows my bank of curiosity. Compound interest, but for my mind.

I think the same is true for everyone reading this article: you have a personal level of curiosity. It grows as you nurture it.

The most profound consequence of my curiosity in both my professional and personal lives is the reduction of time to take action. Curiosity shortens the distance between "what if" and "let's try." It moves me from wondering to doing, from hesitation to exploration. Rather than getting stuck in the loop of overanalyzing or waiting for perfect clarity, curiosity invites me to lean in, ask a better question, and take the next small, meaningful step. I often joke that I build the bridge while I'm already walking across it. I trust that curiosity will hand me the next bridge plank when I need it. It's exhilarating, and a little terrifying, but that's where momentum lives.

Of course, I'm not a machine. My curiosity doesn't always march forward with precision; sometimes it floods the room with a thousand possibilities until I can't hear myself think. The "what ifs" can overwhelm as much as they inspire. But even in those moments, curiosity reminds me to stay in motion, to keep building, keep learning, and keep believing that the bridge will hold. This imprecision of possibility is why the strategic foresight process piqued my curiosity

Journey Into Foresight

Emily Dickinson and her charge to "dwell in possibility," plus my own curiosity, are the driving forces behind my journey into strategic foresight, well, plus an invitation from my then-CEO, Ryan Good, at Foundations

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-reboot/202311/the-psychology-and-neuroscience-of-curiosity>

Health & Wholeness, to join a strategic foresight cohort through Envision Greater Green Bay. What began as a professional opportunity quickly became a way to channel my lifelong habit of asking “what if?” into a disciplined approach for thinking about the future. I imagine my CEO already knew that.

Envision Greater Green Bay wasn't just where I learned strategic foresight; it's where curiosity found its structure. In 2022, I joined one of their foresight cohorts, a gathering of thinkers and doers who shared a simple belief: the future can be shaped, not just survived. Rooted in Northeast Wisconsin, Envision brings together community leaders to explore trends, challenge assumptions, and imagine preferred futures with both rigor and hope. It was energizing to be surrounded by others who, like Emily Dickinson, “dwell in possibility.” Each session felt less like training and more like an invitation to think expansively, connect unlikely dots, and find comfort in ambiguity.

That experience became the bridge to everything that followed. Strategic foresight taught me how to drive change without being consumed by it and to explore possibilities with purpose and to meet uncertainty with structure and imagination. Instead of fearing what's next, I learned to map it, to imagine it, and, when needed, to build the bridge while walking across it. Equally powerful was learning not to turn away from uncomfortable possibilities. Examining difficult futures, the ones we'd rather not face, revealed that foresight isn't about predicting perfection; it's about building resilience for whatever comes.

That experience at Envision stayed with me. It reshaped how I saw both my work and the world, quietly taking root until the next spark appeared: the University of Houston's Strategic Foresight Certificate Program, a five-week online seminar led by professional futurist, Dr. Andy Hines. I joined with equal parts excitement and humility, ready to stretch my thinking again.

The coursework was both exhilarating and disorienting; a new language for seeing the world. Among other strategies, we learned to scan for weak signals, map baseline and transformational futures, and explore how social, technological, environmental, economic, and political forces interact. Conversations with classmates from across industries and continents often drifted from theory to imagination and, ultimately, to the question: what kind of futures do we *want* to create?

After earning my Certificate of Completion, I went further by pursuing the Certificate of Achievement through a project close to home: *The Future of U.S. Charities*. I leaned into the uncomfortable and explored how technology, shifting demographics, and public expectations might transform giving and nonprofit leadership. What emerged was both sobering and exciting: a vision of a sector that must become more collaborative, adaptive, and transparent to thrive. It convinced me that the future of generosity will depend less on transactions and more on relationships, shared purpose, and trust.

That learning didn't stay theoretical for long. Strategic Foresight shapes how I see, plan, and lead. I look beyond the immediate, notice quiet signals, and ask not “What should we do next?” but “What could this become?” Most of all, it's changed how I collaborate. I now invite others into conversations about multiple futures, choosing curiosity over certainty and imagination over fear. Foresight, I've learned, is less about prediction and more about posture, i.e., standing ready, open, and attentive to what's emerging.

In the end, curiosity remains my companion. Foresight gave it structure, but the wonder was always there. Curiosity isn't about collecting answers; it's about staying awake to the questions. And if I'm lucky, I'll keep building the bridge as I walk across it, one plank of possibility at a time.

What's Next

In strategic foresight, we imagine both baseline and transformational futures, one steady, one bold. The goal isn't to predict, but to prepare and to see what might unfold if we stay the course or dare to reimagine it. Using that same framework in my own story, the baseline future feels familiar: continuing to weave strategic foresight into my nonprofit work, helping others look beyond the next project or plan. But the possibility of the transformational one is an alluring beacon: a future where strategic foresight becomes art as much as practice. Perhaps I'll gather other curious souls and build what doesn't yet exist.

I also hope to inspire others to follow their own curiosity, whether it's to take a class, attend a workshop at Envision Greater Green Bay, or simply ask "what if?" a little more often. Strategic Foresight isn't just for futurists; it's for anyone willing to imagine better tomorrows.

Both paths are real. For now, I'll keep walking the bridge as it builds beneath me, plank by plank, trusting curiosity to guide the way. And when I need a reminder, I'll take a cue from Emily and dwell in possibility, preferably with coffee in hand and a very open calendar.

Kelly Nutty is a passionate nonprofit leader and fundraising professional with more than fifteen years of progressive experience serving nonprofit organizations. She spent most of her nonprofit life in Northeast Wisconsin, particularly in Appleton and Green Bay. In 2023, she relocated to Raleigh, North Carolina, where she currently serves in a leadership and fundraising role at a local nonprofit. A former litigation attorney, Kelly brings a unique blend of strategic insight, nonprofit experience, and a deep commitment to community. She leads with possibility, curiosity, and a passion for exploring new perspectives.