

**EPISODE 69**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:06] ANNOUNCER:** You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world, with Rick Torseth and guests.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:00:20] RT:** Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth, and this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. We are the podcast where we hold conversations with people around the world, actually, who have made decisions in their life and in their career trajectory to be involved in dealing with highly complex, what I often call, wicked problems. We want to learn from them about what they know about how to travel that road. Also, for the sake of us, we might pick up some ideas about how we can enhance our capacity to do that work ourselves.

Today, it's my good fortune to have Bill Sharpe, key of the *Three Horizons: The Patterning of Hope* process and book, which we'll talk about here shortly. Those of futures practitioners of science, technology, and society, you remember Bill, the International Futures Forum, you're a visiting professor at West England, and you are the author of the book, and we're going to talk about all of that here in this conversation. First of all, it's good to have you on the podcast. Welcome.

**[0:01:13] BS:** Thank you, Rick. Good to be with you.

**[0:01:15] RT:** Okay. Let's give people some context before we get into some of the details, the specifics of your work. What do you want them to know about you that helps establish that context?

**[0:01:25] BS:** I think the most important thing is just the journey I've been on, that I see us all on, or many of us all in the civilization that we find ourselves part of. I've always loved science. I had a career in the computer industry, always on the research and innovation end of it. Very much involved in finding out new stuff in technology and helping bring it to market. When I came

out of that world, where I'd learned a lot of the practices of thinking about the future and how to face uncertainty while still having a sense of agency, I found that none of those tools were in widespread use, or very few of them.

As we head into the level of uncertainty and change that we now all face with all the multiple interacting crises that demand change. I felt it was really important to play my part in seeing how we could bring a better capacity to bear on those challenges. For the last 20 years or so, I've been working with colleagues on how do we really cultivate the capacity to meet uncertainty and change from a perspective of hope and agency? That's what's given birth to the book and the other work that I'm now part of.

**[0:02:34] RT:** Okay, great. I should say, that you and I spent some time together at a conference a few weeks ago here in Oxford, England, where I am. You were a presenter there, and I was telling you offline before we started that your topic had great resonance for the members of the alumni group during this conference of which there's about 45, or 50 people coming from all around the world. I'm interested in, let's start with this, you said it twice, capacity. What is it about understanding the future that we're not so great at inherently, and therefore, what is the work of building capacity and why is that matter that we actually spend time on that?

**[0:03:14] BS:** That's a good question. What I see is that we often find it difficult simply to face change. I had an experience years ago, I used to work for a big computer company, and I went and worked in the US for a while to help transfer some technology. It was in Boise, Idaho. I decided, I'd like to learn skiing, because there was a little ski slope outside town. Not very big, but just enough to learn on. I'd never really learned to ski. I'd done it very little when I was young. I got myself some lessons.

I sat on the ski lift, lesson number one, with this trap by sitting next to me, the ski instructor. As we started going up and leaving the ground behind, and you know what it's like, you suddenly think, "Oh, I'm really going to have to do this." He turned to me and he said, "My job is to help people love gravity." I thought that was a great way of putting it, because once you're standing at the top of a ski slope, and you're looking down, it can look pretty exciting, but also, pretty dangerous. You know that one way or another, you're going to end up at the bottom. The only question is whether you're going to enjoy the process of getting down there and go down there

with skill and being part of the process, or whether you're going to end up as a heap of ski sticks and skis on the ground and hurting yourself.

I think of the work I do as the same, in the sense of moving into the future is always moving into uncertainty. If you ask people what's the main quality of the future, first of all, they'll come up with, "We don't know. It's uncertain." Then some people say, "Yes, but it's a sense of opportunity." Other people will say, "It's risk, it's threat, it's difficulty." That really captures it. I think of my job as helping people to love uncertainty. How do we move into the unknown of the future, but always with the sense of skilled attunement to the forces at play, such that we're always realizing ourselves and realizing life for ourselves and others? How do we develop what is a natural capacity of life to move forward into the unknown, and live it fully with a sense of being attuned to life and all that it offers?

**[0:05:14] RT:** This is a significantly larger and complex social mandate you're giving yourself. Meaning that, generally speaking, as my experience about my own life and a lot of people around me, that the future is A, nebulous. I don't spend as much time probably thinking about the future is probably in my best interest. More importantly, a lack, an appreciation for why it's important that I do that. Therefore, I'm not motivated, or mobilized to be in action around addressing a future.

I'm curious, we're going to get into this a little bit with the specifics of your Three Horizons Model. What is it you're learning about human beings' receptiveness to seeing and peering and starting to play with a way in which to impact the future in a deliberate way? Before they come to you and start working with you, how do they show up with that capacity? What's it look like?

**[0:06:07] BS:** Everybody, I think, naturally has an orientation to the future in the sense of the dreams and hopes that we hold. This is not something that we have to implant in people. It's a natural quality that we have. When we get on to Three Horizons, we'll talk about that. Everybody turns up already having some awareness of the future. Presented to them, as I said, either in the sense of an open midst, a sense of possibility a sense of discovery and hope, or with some sense of difficulty, or threat of challenge that they may be worried about. This is how people turn up. This is not something we have to invent.

What people don't turn up with is good and practical ways to harness the way they're turning up with other people, so that collectively, we can marshal our agency together in organized ways. They're saying often, if you get 20 people, 20 experts in a room, the equivalent of one idiot, the more we have expertise, often the less able we are able to harness it together. We spend a lot of time disagreeing with each other, not finding modes of harnessing that capacity to envision the future together in positive ways. We find that very difficult to do and often talk past one another.

What I see is we all have this inbuilt orientation to the future, but we haven't developed many effective ways of convening ourselves together to use it well in our collective move into the future, our collective agency.

**[0:07:43] RT:** For people, let's begin to introduce and unpack your model, The Three Horizons. I'm going to let you go first here for sure and explain to people not only what it is, but maybe a bit of history about how it came to manifest itself in the form that you now have.

**[0:08:01] BS:** Three Horizons is just this really simple model for getting a conversation going about the future and change. If we're having a Three Horizons conversation, it's because there is either something opening up in the future that we want to really move towards, or the feeling that the way we're doing things now is running out of road and there's some sense of change and transformation coming towards us that we've really got to face up to and deal with. It's in that context that we use Three Horizons. The very simple idea is that we're always living in some patterns of life that are going on from day to day.

The first horizon is that established pattern in society. We get up every day. We expect, or hope that the lights will come on, that we'll be able to buy the food at the shops, we'll go to work, we'll get the kids to school, the teachers will turn up and teach them. There are patterns of life going on that we maintain by taking part in them, and that's the basic notion that we live patterned lives that we are reproducing day to day by taking part in them. That's the first horizon. And we want it to be stable. We don't want it to give away, and it can be a terrible shock when it does, either at a personal level, or a social level, or when things give away and don't perform the way we want.

The third horizon is that new pattern that we can see, either we want to move towards, or we've got to move towards, that we can envision the possibility of a new pattern replacing the old, and whatever dimension that might be. That's the third horizon. The one we hold in mind that isn't yet fully realized. It's a vision of the future. Of course, not all visions will come to pass, and it's a good job that they don't, because some visions aren't very good for us. It's going to be contested. There'll be multiple stories, but we all have a natural capacity at the level of our own lives, or our shared lives to hold a vision in mind of that future.

The second horizon is that period of transition, where one pattern is giving away, another pattern is coming into being. The second horizon is that zone of messy, complicated transformation. It's the zone where the entrepreneur tries something out, the social entrepreneur, the business entrepreneur. If you've done any of that, you know many of these things fail. But eventually, we settle down on what's going to become the new – the third horizon gets established, becomes the new normal, and in its turn, becomes the new first horizon, just the new way things are going to get done.

Example would be the transition we're in the middle of from fossil fuel energy to renewable energy. We're in the middle of that, where many things are now settled down, but some are still in the space of innovation, trial and error, exploring all that. That's The Three Horizon framework. The pattern we're in, the pattern we're moving towards and that transition between. It's coming to being by the contribution of quite a number of people. There was an earlier version of Three Horizons that McKinsey came up with, sort of short, medium, and long-term change. But what makes Three Horizons really work is this sense that they're all there in the present moment. They aren't just short, medium, and long-term. They're three qualities of the future and the present.

The orientation to maintaining today's pattern. That's the first horizon. That's a managerial behavior and mindset in life. What am I responsible for? What are you responsible for? Then the third horizon is a visionary orientation. What can I hold in mind as values and possibilities to the future, dreams and aspirations that I'm going to work on? That's quite different quality of being in the present moment. What am I going to stand for? Then between the two, the second horizon is, there's a chance here. There's an opportunity. I can be an entrepreneur. I can grab this opportunity. I can go and try and shift the system.

It turns out that everybody can really relate to these three different qualities. Everybody has them intrinsically. Kids pick up this framework really, really easily. This way of looking towards the future came into being in work I was doing with a colleague, Tony Hodgson, who's been my mentor in Futures for many years. We were working on a piece of government foresight. Quite a complex project around the future of smart cities and transport and mobility, and so on. We found this helped us really begin to make sense on the project.

Then other colleagues of ours, Graham Lester played a key role in this working on education in Scotland, found that it was a very powerful way of creating conversations that people could have around changing the system of education. Another colleague, Jim Ewing, who worked for many years on change and transformation really helped us articulate the idea of the different voices. Several other people each made different contributions to how this framework gradually built up. I've become known for it, simply because I saw that it was catching on quite quickly and you don't often find tools like this that people can just naturally pick up and use. We've all got tools that we use, but they don't often catch on widely. I saw the possibility that if we really got it out there in its very simple basic form, it could act as an entry point for a much deeper practice.

The practice that I will call future consciousness, cultivating our awareness of the future potential of the present moment. That if we spread it out and created a commons of practice, a commons of methods, then it could be not just another tool, another one you put on the shelf alongside the other 20 you've got, but could serve as a shared platform of practice, on which we could build many other practices that would all work together, a bit like the platform on your phone. You've got an Android, or an Apple phone, or whatever. You can build, put in all the different apps and they all work together. That's the direction of travel is an underlying platform that lets us all start to build a shared future consciousness.

**[0:13:50] RT:** There's a lot there. You're provoking some thoughts that didn't have when we were together a few weeks ago here in Oxford. It's a whole another afternoon with Bill Sharpe for me. It's wonderful. It strikes me that my utilization of Three Horizons can occur at a personal level, my own life. If I'm part of a team, it could be introduced in that context. Or if I had requisite authority over a large organization, it could be introduced at that level as well. It's functional in multiple ways with different configurations of human beings. If that's plausible and you're

shaking your head, but let's start with the individual, because I know there's a lot of people who listen to this and they may be intrigued by this. Say a little bit about how an individual might be able to utilize The Three Horizons for themselves, to advance themselves in the direction they envision at the third horizon.

**[0:14:46] BS:** I'll say, when I first started working on this, it was mostly in the context of organizational life in general and how to bring about change at the level of the organization and the social systems of which we're part. Policymakers wanted to bring about major change. What I've found is that people are picking it up and using it on very personal things, like their personal relationships, planning the changes they want to bring about. You can use that in a very simple way. I think what opens up for us, there's one way of looking at it, which is if we can fulfill all our own values in the systems of which we're a part, we don't need you to look at Three Horizons.

Imagine that you've just got the job you've always dreamed of and it's going to help you grow in your career and that your inner values are completely in-line with the organization of which you're part. Then you're in a good place. But the horizons open out when you feel that your own sense of what you want to be, what you want to stand for can no longer be fulfilled in the organization of which you're part. That's actually now a very common situation. I sometimes start organizational work by asking people, what for you is an expression of hope that you're holding for yourself, and then does that fully align with the organization of which you're part? What would it feel like if your own values were fully embodied in the organization you're part of?

Usually, that opens up a gap. It opens up a gap between the pattern in which you're part, the first horizon pattern, and the pattern that you might want to be part of in the future. Then the question is, do you have some agency over creating that new pattern that you want to be part of, or is there a place where you can see that that possibility exists? What changes do you have to make to go and be part of that future? Do you need to change your relationships, or change your job, or become an entrepreneur to try and create the organization that you personally want to be part of? What is that calling out from you?

I find this very simple notion asking, what do you want to stand for, is the key property of the third horizon and say, what do I want my life to really reveal about what it means to live a life? What do I really want to stand for? Then, can I do that within the patterns of which I'm part?

Would I need to go out and simply stand for this in a fresh way, such that something new can happen?

**[0:17:01] RT:** I might come back to that. But at first, before we do that, I'd like to have you address it from your original way in which you introduce the work, which is at the organizational level. Because there's a different entry point there. I'm thinking, somebody high enough up in the organization has enough authority to bring Bill Sharpe in and introduce this work. If so, additional layers of say, social complexity, or just pace of change, pace of travel, to use your word, that occurs in an organization level between where they are horizon one, where they want to get at horizon three. I know from your presentation, there's a lot of messy stuff that goes on at horizon two in that transition. What's the bigger challenges that you face from the outside when you want to help an organization make this journey?

**[0:17:52] BS:** I'm not sure particularly call it challenges. It's how do you organize this work, that the challenges belong in the realm of the people sponsoring this. The first thing is there has to be a sponsor at the top who is taking that decision that you said, to bring this conversation into the room, that they really want to lead some process of change. Since organizations exist to keep doing something from day-to-day, you must have the person with enough authority in the room. Otherwise, no one else will pay attention. That's the first challenge is, is the person who's got the authority to really challenge the organization to do something different, are they clear why they want to do this and are they going to turn up? And if they're not going to turn up, it's going to fail, or say to people, it doesn't matter whether you're a community theatre, or a melting international company. It's not a status thing. It's the authority to lead change must be in the room. Otherwise, other people can see it's not real.

Then in terms of doing Three Horizons, this sits in the broader field of Futures work, and there's a lot of good advice around on how to build up a reasonable scoping of what you're looking at. I don't think we need to go through all that here. But what you're doing is creating a container. As a practitioner, I then work within the container that that sponsor holds to allow you to take apart the current assumptions around success and the patterns of life that they're part of and envision the future and then look for the growth points in the second horizon.



The way I usually think of it is that having built, first, you do the first horizon, articulate all the things that seem to be failing, articulate also the things that are critical, that are holding it in place that you might need to challenge. Then you envision the third horizon, which really brings out the values that you're after and make that vision as specific as possible. Then it's in the second horizon where you say, now what is already going on? Are there growth points of change that we can align ourselves with? Where are the growth points out there that other people are trying to do what we're trying to do that we might align with and have allies, or have we got to compete for how this future is going to turn out?

Once we've got a sense of what that second horizon is, then that's when metaphorically, or literally I hand the pen back to the manager and say right now that you've got this picture of the second horizon, the entrepreneurial space. This is your entrepreneurial moment. You've got to work together to decide how you're actually going to take the next step into that space, whether you're up for the risks and challenges that you're going to have to face. If you need any help from me, ask for it. But basically, I'm in the process then of handing it back, so they can take that next step of action and discovery.

**[0:20:35] RT:** Say, we should tell people that we're having a conversation, but there is a very useful visual layout of The Three Horizons in your book, and we will put some information in the show notes, so people can see the visual, because I think that helps understand the course of travel for each of these Three Horizons. I am recollecting that when we are together and you're walking our group through this process, there is this interplay that takes place where the second horizon is being activated and people are starting to – they've taken the pen they've written some stuff, they've made some decisions they want to get to work on it. Talk a little bit, because people listening might be thinking, “Well, this is pretty mechanical, pretty straightforward. We can just move from one to the other and life is great and grand and off we go.” But there's some stuff that goes on in that middle place there when you activate horizon two that requires some extra stuff, I would think, among the human beings who are in the process.

**[0:21:32] BS:** They are plainly vastly different circumstances in which you might be doing this work. You as a change leader would know this better than me. The first way I heard this articulated was the distinction between the world of business and the world of management. That in the world of business, we treat the organization as an actor. What is Apple going to do?

What is some organization going to do? Then the world of management is where we look at it as a living organization made up of human beings, who have to cope with change. In the one you're saying, you're leaving the personal issues outside the room in the world of management saying, well, that's up to the sponsor and the management team to bring the organization along.

The other end know that the issues of change, the substance of the work, the work of organizational change and what that's going to mean for the people involved. Then you can go even further and say, well, there are issues where what's at stake doesn't really challenge people in any deep existential way, or ones that are around peace building and conflict, where there are genuinely existential issues.

I don't have much experience, or any experience in deep conflict management and resolution. If you're going to work in that space, then you need some very specific skills and experience to hold that space for people, such that issues of trauma and loss and conflict can be handled with the appropriate support for the people in the room. We could go anywhere in that space. But really, that's not my practice on the most challenging end. My practice has mostly been on the end, where word is the external landscape that you're most concerned with. I have more recently been working with people who are using Three Horizons and others Futures techniques in the field of conflict resolution, and we find that it's very helpful, again, a helpful underlying framework that can support that work quite well.

**[0:23:32] RT:** I'm interested in this word you've used a couple times, agency. First of all, define agency from your perspective, given the work you've been doing. Then, why is it showing up as a move, or as a way of being that helps facilitate this process?

**[0:23:48] BS:** The way I like to think about agency is it's always related in some way to the pattern that we're part of in the moment. If we go back to where we started in this podcast and I talked about skiing, you develop agency according to your attunement to the forces at play. When I stood at the top of a ski slope as a novice, I didn't have much agency for how I was going to get down the slope. I couldn't take on a black slope. I couldn't take on anything challenging. Or if I did, I was going to get into trouble.

I love watching tennis, and over years watched Roger Federer, who had this extraordinary attunement to the forces at play and would seem – would just pick up a ball coming at 130 miles an hour across the net at him, and then drop it with a drop shot the other side of the net. Well, that's agency. That's agency because of years of attunement to the forces and developing the inner relationship with the outer world. In that sense, that's where our freedoms come from. The more deeply we make ourselves part of what is going on, the paradox is the greater agency and freedom that we have.

What my work is about is what sort of awarenesses can we cultivate for seeing the patterns of which we're part, that will then give us freedom of action in how we meet that. The way I like to think of it is that that's the nature of being a living thing, when you think about it for a moment. Is that every living creature and every organization could be thought of as a living creature, is always having to pay attention to two things. Being for itself, keeping itself alive relating to the world to meet its immediate needs and maintain its own integrity, and being part of the whole, being related, maintaining its relationships such that it will be able to meet its personal needs.

We're always at every moment bringing an alignment between being for ourselves and being part of the whole. The deeper that alignment is, the more freedom we have. Just think of how you enjoy being part of any team. You're performing alongside others. It might be singing in a choir, being in a team sport, discussing books, where the more deeply you feel you participate, the more completely you are yourself. For me, that's the highest agency. We're in flow both being ourselves and being part of the whole.

**[0:26:09] RT:** I'm coming from a country for whom we seem is a mass a long ways from whole self and community, as we round into this really consequential presidential election. I'm not going to ask you to weigh in on your political views here. But when you look at groups of people like this where there's large social disruption, discomfort, that the whole has got at least some fracture points in it, and it seems that oftentimes, the people in charge of that whole are unskilled with the work of what you're talking about, or the work that you do, either because they just don't know, or they just don't care. But when you look at that space, what do you think about with relation to your model? I just wanted you sometimes think, man, if I could just get in a room with some of these people and they were willing listeners, we could actually make some progress here.

Because it does seem, if people are as you say willing, and they have it some agency but they don't have the means or the knowledge that this work could be a one of the blocks that's missing that could facilitate larger effective community well I'm trying to take my own medicine and say where do I have agency where can I start to cultivate new patterns of hope. My ambition is to at least bring some ways of understanding this into play that can help. I don't think of it is telling people what to do in any sense, but more cultivating that this shared practice, or of cultivating a shared future consciousness and a shared awareness of the future potential at the present moment.

What I noticed is that we don't have even very good words for it. If you can't even name something, it's very hard to grow towards it. There's a lovely African word, Ubuntu. We are, therefore I am, is one translation of it. We don't even have a similar word in our language. I've taken to using the term mutual qualities of life, qualities that you only have because you have them together, like a human language. You can't have it on your own, really. You can't have harmony on your own.

What I'm looking is how do we gradually build up a much deeper community of life. You said it's a big agenda. Well, a big agenda start with small actions. I sometimes get inspiration, try and cast my mind back to, what must it have been like when human language first coming into being? There was a time when we didn't all the fluency of language that we now have, and we're the only species that has it. Maybe we're also at the same point, we're just at the beginning of a much deeper shared consciousness coming into being, a consciousness that really is fueled by hope and love and communion amongst ourselves.

What would it be like if that's what was going on? And it would feel just like it does now. That you can see that and we all are hurt by the lack of it. We are deeply troubled by the lack of our ability to live positively together. That tells us something in a sense is wrong. If this was just a natural state of things, we wouldn't have that feeling. We can see that potential in us to bring about a much deeper quality of shared life in which we are all deeply realized. Let's do the things we can to start to grow that, and you grow that just by being it, by doing it, by embodying it.

I like the word integrity, which captures the notion of wholeness, and life is a process is a wholeness nested at every level, the cells, the organs, the people, the societies. The third horizon is about that creative wholeness. It's the creative integrity of making wholeness in every moment. That's how I orient myself towards it saying, what can I do to be in service of that?

**[0:30:03] RT:** Let's help some people here. I can really imagine people thinking more local of their own community. Could be quite a small circle that represents their definition of their community, but they want to be more active and create something. The first thing I would say is, get Bill's book. The reason I say that is because it's a very wonderfully written, succinct, on point, and clear to understand description of the work in the model of three horizons, so I would start with that.

What lurks inside that work for people who don't have you in a room with them, but they want to give it a go that you'd say, okay, here's some things you need to pay attention to as you travel this road?

**[0:30:43] BS:** Thanks for nice words about the book. I'll say, I just did try and write it not for people who were Futures experts, or anything else, but just for anybody who's concerned with how we orientate ourselves, change the future and the challenges that we're all moving into. We've started creating a body of online resources. I think you're going to send out the links afterwards, where there are some tutorials online, lots of tools. I'd really just encourage people to say, look, if you're in any sense regard yourselves as wanting to be an "activist," to start to be part of processes of change, this is a very simple tool that you can just start to use.

Our advice is just go and use it. Just hold it in mind and see whether it's turning up in conversations. You don't even maybe have to use the tool explicitly to begin with. Just start to look at situations in that way, see how it helps you make sense, see how it makes you have a slightly better discussion between the different voices that are always turning up talking past each other. Start to develop a little confidence in that way of looking at things. Then you should find that it'll just come quite naturally. That if you have the confidence just to explain the tool to people, they'll catch on with it. It's a very easy thing to get going with. That's why we're really putting some resource behind it. There's no real barriers to using it if you want to be in that process of change.

Yeah, there are tutorials. Some people are now running courses. The organization I'm part of runs a course. But you can get going with no more than just reading the book, looking at the resources, having a go.

**[0:32:15] RT:** Okay. You have a wonderful metaphor in the book about developing future consciousness. You have, again, it helps it when they look at the pictures of this description I'm going to give here. But it comes in a form of four islands. Would you mind sharing, A, what you mean in a little bit more detail about developing future consciousness, because that may be a concept that some people aren't quite as familiar with as you. Talk about these four islands that you use as a basis to amplify it.

**[0:32:47] BS:** I'd like to just try and demystify this term, future consciousness. I picked it up from my colleagues in the International Futures Forum, who had a little bunch of cards and it said, develop a future consciousness to inform the present. I thought, that's a really powerful idea. As I got into this field of work, I realized that while we have the word memory for our record of the past, we don't have an equivalent word for the future for that faculty that we have. What I've understood is that we use the same part of the brain for thinking about the past and making stories about the past and for stories about the future. There's a local poet who died a few years ago, a well-known wealth poet who said words to the effect of, memory is our imagination of the past, and imagination is our memory of the future. There's a symmetry there.

I've taken just to using future consciousness and giving it this really simple definition, an awareness of the future potential of the present moment. Just so, that's some way of talking about what it is we're trying to cultivate. That future potential seems to arise naturally in terms of these three horizons, the pattern we're part of that's going on, one I can imagine and stand for and bring into reality, and the dynamism of the second horizon. They're just three qualities of awareness.

I think of developing consciousness as bringing into our aware mind a capacity that we've already got, and then being able to cultivate it, like learning to play a golf swing, or learning to sing in a choir. There's nothing unnatural, but we might not have cultivated that ability that we have. The islands, the imaginary islands came out of stuff I'd read about, how the sailors in the

Pacific islands, the indigenous tribes learned to navigate across thousands of miles of city from one set of islands to another. You can imagine, this would be pretty challenging in the days before you had GPS and you're in some tiny little boat, and you're out, everything's disappeared over the horizon and you've got to find, navigate to the next load of islands. How on earth do you do that?

Of course, they learn all about the tides and the winds and everything and learn the pattern of the islands that are actually there, and you can see, okay, after two days, you should see these islands turning up on the starboard. Look out for them. That's pretty obvious. Then I learned that also, they learn about how to navigate with the ones that you might not see, but you know they're there. They're over the horizon, so if you drift off, you're going to see them, but you shouldn't actually see them. You think, okay, that's pretty clever. You navigate with the ones that you can't see.

Then, I learned that when there aren't any, they make some up. They create some imaginary islands and use them to navigate with. At this moment, your mind goes, "Really? Does that make it easier?" The answer is well, yes. If you're trying to hold many different subtle signs together, there were just ways of organizing that use of the mind to navigate through, was to say, just imagine this island over there, then that'll give you a mental anchor for the path that you're on. I think that's just a wonderful metaphor for how we can orientate ourselves to an unknown future. Of course, the other practice of futures is scenario planning. Telling stories in which the future tells out in different ways scenarios are like these imagined islands that we can navigate with.

What I wanted to put in in the book is as we think about the third horizon, we actually want to navigate towards. Given the predicament that the world is in, many people now use the language of regeneration, a regenerative future. Regenerative life is where each form of life supports each other life. It's one of those qualities that you can't really have on your own. The nature of life is that each life in its own way is part of the whole and the whole supports each sort of life. It's one of those qualities we were talking about that you can't really have on your own. Life is something we have in common. The more deeply regenerative we are, the more of those relationships are renewing one another.

Whereas, in our modern world, we've destroyed many of those patterns. Many of them are degenerative. They're destroying the other patterns on which they ultimately rely, the water, the air, the rivers, soil. I wondered, what might we use as these imagined islands that would help us see our way into a more regenerative future. The first pair were about abundance and integrity. When you look at the flow of life over the lifetime of the earth, life grows towards abundance, towards creating life out of the abundant flow of energy. Imagine yourself four billion years ago looking at the planet with no life on it and saying, would you have expected to see the chaotic fecundity and abundance of life that we now have when we look out of the window?

It seems that there's a mutual quality of life, which takes the abundance of energy and turns it into an abundance of life, life at every scale. Orient to, what is abundant? What are we seeing as a flow of abundance that we can participate in and structure into an abundance of mutual life? That's one axis. The other axis is the way that is done is through variety, and amongst us all is that it's variety and mutuality. It is this quality that the more deeply we are all related, the more fully we are ourselves. It's a paradox.

If you go in a rainforest, there's just this explosion of different qualities of life, but all maintaining one overall forest ecosystem. Hold in mind that what we're always trying to develop is simultaneously deeper variety, each person being most fully what they are themselves, but in a relationship of deeper mutuality, being in collective flow together. I use those as four invisible islands, imaginary islands when I'm doing a new piece of work to just see, what can we cultivate both as that source of abundance that we will participate in and it's bringing to life through variety and mutuality.

**[0:38:53] RT:** I read a lot of books. What I'm impressed by in your book is how much good stuff you packed into a very small, easily accessible book. It's available to everybody who just wants to read and learn something. They're going to pull up some ideas that they can work with right away. I want to go back to where you started, or at least early on the conversation as we come towards our end. It's this expression of hope. The phrase, expression of hope. As you and I know, but the listeners don't know that the conference that you and I were attending was built around hope. We explored this notion of hope from all sorts of different angles over the course of three days. But you had that in your lexicon before you ever walked into the room for this conference. Expression of hope seems like a timely thing to kick around right now in the state



that we're in. For Bill Sharpe, expression of hope means what? Shows up how? How does it move you, propel you?

**[0:39:51] BS:** I've also given it the phrase, the subtitle of the book, is the patterning of hope, which how do we express hope? How do we embody hope in such a way that it can repattern our lives, building these new qualities of life together? From what I've read and from what I've seen, the way that happens is that people pay attention to the human around them and what it might mean in the moment to make some act that renews human life. I did in fact, as I started bringing this work out to a wider field work with an organization called Leaders Quest that was very active in the Middle East, and we went on a quest, they were organizing to Israel and Palestine. I took with me the question of, how did people sustain hope in that very difficult situation? That was long before the current crisis. It was something like 10 years ago. The difficulty obviously was still there.

What I saw very much was that people did what they could in the situation they were to build this mutual quality of life with the human beings around them, and to build some modest pattern of life whether it was looking, supporting housing rights for other people, or challenging their own government, or doing whatever they could. Reading people, like Viktor Frankl, you realize that even in the most desperate circumstances we cannot be deprived of the ultimate ability to be of service to life in the moment. That sometimes might cost us a great deal. In some situations, it will cost somebody their life and that's a decision they might make. But for me, hope and experience of life even in the presence of death.

The opposite of hope is despair. Many people experience despair. Despair is when you find yourself experiencing death, even though you are in fact in the midst of life. For me, hope is this, what my wife has called the inner spring of life. It is the capacity in any moment to connect with that spring, and it will give you something, however modest that you can do to restore wholeness for that moment, in relation to yourself and others. By doing so, in that small moment, it's like a little seed, can start to grow, can start to spread. Might not. It's not about optimism as we discussed in Oxford. But it's an act that is always available to us in some degree, to be connected to that intrinsic spring of life.

**[0:42:28] RT:** Well said. Okay, so as we finish up here, there's zero chance I asked all the right questions here of you. What have I not asked, this context that we've been discussing, or any context you want to go with that you think is important for listeners to know?

**[0:42:44] BS:** We might have just discussed the initiative I'm part of to really spread this way of thinking and working more widely. We could talk about that for a moment.

**[0:42:53] RT:** Please, please. Go ahead.

**[0:42:55] BS:** As we were saying earlier, the reason I'm doing this and doing it with my colleagues is that now after 10 years of the book being out there and building resources and spreading it, it is being picked up very, very widely. I do have an ambition that we should build out a shared practice of future consciousness with a global freely available commons of resources, and that's the path we're on. One way of articulating this big ambition as you called it is, if you think about the predicament, wherein a colleague of miners said, "If we're to reach a sustainable regenerative civilization and net zero, everything's going to have to change. If we don't, everything is going to have to change. We are heading into massive change."

My goal is to equip a hundred million of the next generation with the tools they need to have good conversations, positive conversations, hopeful conversations about change and transformation. That would only be one in a hundred of people on earth. Just imagine that we don't have one in a hundred people who just feel well equipped to step into that space and hold the conversations that are needed. The invitation is for people to connect with what's going on in the broader field, but also in what we're trying to do with this initiative and see whether we can cultivate this shared capacity for regenerative futures of hope.

**[0:44:19] RT:** This initiative has a name, right?

**[0:44:22] BS:** Well, it's The Three Horizon Network, simple as that. At the moment, its home is the Future Stewards website. We're just in the process of seeing how we might take the next steps in moving that to its next stage.

**[0:44:34] RT:** Okay. When people listen to the podcast and you look to show notes, they'll see the links. There is a place that they could link to and begin to maybe check out what you're trying to build and even become a part of it, I would assume. Okay, let's advocate for that a little bit. I'll advocate that in my social media stuff as well.

Bill Sharpe, I want to thank you for making time to have this conversation with me. It's been a pleasure, just like it was to spend the three days in Oxford with you a few weeks ago. Thank you very much for coming on the podcast.

**[0:45:04] BS:** Thank you very much for having me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[0:45:09] ANNOUNCER:** Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please, take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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