COMPASS

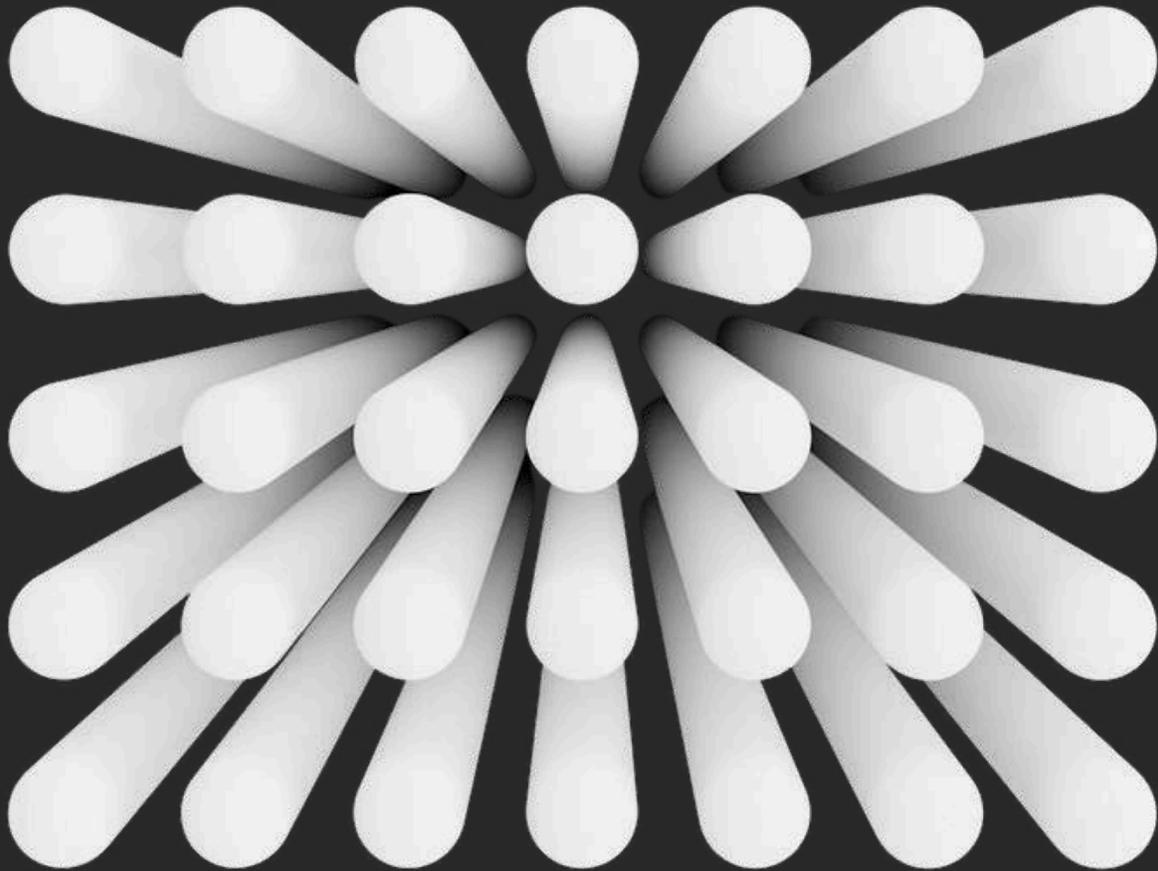## The Global Voice of Professional Futurists

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CO-CREATING MEANINGFUL CHANGE IN PERIODS OF LIMINALITY

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An interview with futurist and collaborative designer Eva Oloumi

Eva Oloumi interviewed by

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Liminal periods evoke bewilderment and yet carry immense potential for transformation. In this interview with futurist Eva Oloumi, we explore what liminality means to her and how collaborative design can guide us toward a fairer world. Finally, we demystify grief and hope in times of liminality.

As democracy, child rights, and international law erode, the old models of decision-making falter. Bo Viktor Nylund of UNICEF Innocenti notes, "Between impulse and considered action, there is a critical moment to pause and reflect. In this space lies an important sense of freedom in that you can eventually make choices."

Liminality is the state of being between stages, like the moment between sleep and wakefulness. With rising aid cuts, trade tensions, and nuclear threats, some, such as Rockefeller, see the world order shifting toward deals that serve only a few, while others see multipolarity offering both chaos and possibility (Global Times).

What is your personal interpretation of liminality in the context of today's global turbulence? What does it mean to be "in-between" when old systems collapse but new ones have yet to form?

Eva: I don't accept the premise that this is a uniquely turbulent period. History moves in cycles: birth, growth, stability, decline, and regrowth. Futurist Ziadduldin Sardar calls it post-normal times, where chaos, complexity, and contradictions seem to be actively shaping this new transition society. I'm not sure that it's more complex or volatile than before, but the time and space between feedback loops have certainly compressed. We have access to more data in real-time than before.

In my opinion, what we're experiencing isn't unprecedented, but part of a natural cycle I call the Erisian Cycle, named after the Greek goddess of strife; recurring patterns of creation and destruction that all natural patterns follow. And, in those transition spaces lives symmathesy.

Symmathesy refers to interfaces of mutual learning that emerge in threshold spaces, a concept coined by Nora Bateson. Systems thrive through their interfaces and interactions in these mutual learning zones. For example, what is a hand? And where does it end? Does it end at the wrist? Not really – extends through blood, nerves, and sensation. Systems, too, rely on these interdependencies.

When we understand this, we see how organizations, societies, or geopolitical dynamics mirror living systems: complex, interconnected, and constantly evolving. We see that change happens primarily in the in-between spaces. Liminality is not just a transition; it's the necessary context for systems to evolve, adapt, and regenerate.

You have spoken and written about collaborative design and its role in navigating uncertainty. How can collaborative design be leveraged to offer a tangible alternative to outdated decision-making models?

Eva: I live between what appears to be two worlds, collaborative design and foresight, which really should be treated as one. Co-design brings people together to make sense and align across differences. Foresight without this kind of collective sensemaking lacks perspective. No individual or organization can fully understand reality. We all see fractals of what is real. We need ways to see through each other's eyes to understand where we are and where we want to go *together*.

The way we design processes impacts the power structures we uphold. If we aren't intentional, we risk building extractive systems, lacking epistemic integrity, or even mirroring existing power imbalances. Strategies and decisions are built on visions, and visions are powerful constructions and considerations of future conditions and the power dynamics within them.

A true co-designed process doesn't aim to create solutions. It shapes the conditions where insight, alignment, and agency can emerge. It's like making yogurt. You can't control bacteria. Bacteria are going to bacteria. All you can do is create the conditions for fermentation. In this frame, futures literacy becomes essential, not as a forecasting tool, but as an anticipatory practice to stretch our capacity to live and act within the unknown and recognize that every decision made now is a door opened or closed.

Bo Viktor speaks of the importance of pausing. Can you recall instances when pausing and reflection were vital, and what was the outcome?

Eva: Often in high-stakes processes, pausing isn't just helpful but necessary for integrity. For me, one particular moment stands out. Midway through a session involving conflicting institutional agendas, the energy was tense. I was tempted to push forward, but instead called a stop, inviting silence. I remember deliberately not speaking for nearly five minutes, watching discomfort, how people shifted in their chairs and eventually how silence turned into reflection. Pauses always crack something open.

When we resumed, the conversation moved from positions to patterns, from "what we should do" to "why this dynamic keeps repeating." That was the doorway to real alignment. People are generally deeply uncomfortable with silence, but it's often the vacuum of silence within which something new emerges.

Bo Viktor's emphasis on reflection isn't abstract for me. It's something I practice deliberately, rooted in Taoist principles and in understanding that emergence can't be forced. Pausing isn't retreat; it's what allows the system to show itself. It's where the signal comes through.

How can foresight, when combined with collaborative design, be used not just as a planning tool, but as a way to reimagine systems that are currently failing us?

Eva: Foresight, when combined with co-design, is more than a planning tool but a way to understand systems at the level of logic, narrative, and relationship. We saw this firsthand, convening 26 Ontario food and health organizations that were siloed and competing on mandate and funding. The system wasn't just fragmented; it was exhausted and reproducing inequity despite best intentions. Rather than starting with solutions, we created a container to map systemic dynamics, surface unspoken tensions, and imagine futures. We use narrative foresight methods, including Causal

Layered Analysis (CLA), to uncover deeper worldviews upholding fragmentation; scarcity thinking, paternalism, and constructs "charity" rather than food as a human right.

Once patterns became visible, the system shifted toward the emergence of a shared strategy and the co-creation of a new coordinating body adopted by 90% of participating organizations. We never pushed for consensus but carefully managed a process where foresight is embodied, in contrast to the typical approach of extracting data from stakeholders for decisions by a small group of power brokers or "experts."

Periods of liminality are often interpreted through external factors and tend to overlook the internal dimensions that play a key role in shaping humans' understanding of reality. What role do you think individual action plays within this broader liminal space, and how can it complement collective solutions?

Eva: Periods of liminality are misunderstood when viewed only through institutional or technological lenses. The obsession with infrastructure, innovation, and optimization often ignores the inner shifts: the grief, clarity, disorientation, reorientation, and transformations that shape how people respond to systemic change.

For me, the internal dimension is not a soft add-on. To address complex problems, we need to have a willingness to stay present in uncertainty, to question inherited logic, to notice and question the narratives we carry individually. This means that the internal state of participants is just as paramount as the questions with which we grapple.

We spend a lot of time and effort manipulating subtle variables to help people break established patterns and lower power distance: omitting titles, encouraging casual dress, sequestering devices, and hyper-managing seating. We use iteration, music and art to create experimental mindsets and manage energy. We also use methods such as Sohail Inayatullah's inner CLA to help people uncover personal narratives as part of the bigger story.

In moments of liminality, how do you hold space for both grief and hope? For many, especially in the Middle East, these transitions come at a high cost. What roles do design and imagination play in healing and rebuilding?

Eva: Generally, we are all uncomfortable with conflict. This is deeply embedded in social self-preservation. As social creatures, getting along is survival. So naturally, we have existential reactions to even minimal conflict and try to minimize, control, and avoid conflict because it's deeply painful to our psyche.

And yet, we actively strive to treat conflict as necessary information from the system with the perspective that conflict arises from necessary divergent perspectives. An axiom from the MG Taylor methodology, which is core to our practice, states, "Everything that someone tells you is true. They are reporting their experience of reality." This means you can't argue with someone else's perspective. It is their truth and valid information from the system.

So, we don't try to manage conflict, we try to meet it and carefully use speculative design, narrative foresight, and even ritual containers to invite dissenting and divergent truths, let participants speak from the future, or create artifacts from worlds where we have moved beyond current paradigms. Conflict and grief tell us what matters, bearing witness to importance, to primacy. Imagination tells us what's possible.

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This conversation with Eva Oloumi offers a lens into how futures thinking, collaborative design, and systems awareness can shape responses to complexity, liminality, and transformation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eva Oloumi is the founder of Paradeigma, an award-winning and globally recognized collaborative design and transformative foresight practice that brings together world-leading futures expertise with world-class facilitation capacity. She is known for helping people in high stakes, multi-stakeholder contexts collaborate to tackle seemingly unsolvable problems and build transformative futures.

Whether untangling interconnected issues across sectors or driving innovative, sustainable progress, Eva's work spans projects that have reshaped regional food systems, influenced housing national policy debates, and established strategic dialogues on public health issues.