

Eleonora Masini: The Woman Who Gave Me Light and Wings

Jim Dator
Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies
Department of Political Science
University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu

I first met Eleonora at the second International Futures Research Conference, Kyoto, Japan, in 1970, I had corresponded earlier with her because I had published an extensive bibliography on futures studies (*Bulletin of the World Future Society*, 1969) that had caught her attention since she was in the process of developing a library and documentation system with the IRADES group (Istituto Ricerche Applicate Documentazioni e Studi) in Rome. She was already busy creating the future World Futures Studies Federation through her collecting and disseminating information about futures studies activities worldwide to each member of the embryonic futures community

I remember very well our first encounter. The building in Kyoto where the conference was held was new, vast, and very impressive. It was constructed in such a way as to remind one, inside and out, of a drip sandcastle one might make on a beach. The main conference hall was connected by a somewhat stuffy glass-encased walkway to another, less spectacular building where many of the smaller meetings were held.

While walking from the conference hall to one of the meeting rooms I was met by a small group of mostly men and one woman walking back towards the main hall. As I recall, the men were in black suits. In comparison, the woman was almost floating in a light, flowing dress. Someone in the group had apparently determined who I was beforehand and the woman spoke to me. I could barely hear her, she spoke so softly and gently. She was graciousness personified. It was Eleonora Masini, and her companions were others from IRADES.

I don't recollect that we had any serious conversations in Kyoto, but shortly thereafter I got an invitation from her to come to Rome in 1971 to attend a conference jointly sponsored by IRADES and Mankind 2000 on the question of documentation of information about futures research. The venue of the conference struck me with its modern use of wood and light, and innovative shelving techniques. Most of the early futurists were there, many of whom I had met in Kyoto, but I was impressed by the gentle/firm way in which Eleonora managed the meeting. While it was clear who was listening and learning most earnestly, it was also clear who was making sure there was something worth learning from what was being said.

One of features of that first visit to Rome that I remember was that it snowed a bit, unusual both for Rome and for a boy like me from Honolulu. Also, while Eleonora and others wanted me to view the sights of the Eternal City, my only interest was in talking with the people at the conference and learning more about futures studies from their points of view. I have never had the slightest interest in sightseeing wherever I have been. It is living people and their lively ideas about the futures that excites me. So Eleonora

and some of the others devised a plan. On the last day of the meeting, when I was to take an evening flight from Rome back eventually to Honolulu, she engaged a taxi for me and told the driver to take me to the most important sights of Rome as he drove to the airport. He did, and so I got to see --fleeting--the indeed impressive ruins of the many glorious pasts of Rome.

After we were done with that, and the driver had tried, unsuccessfully, to sell me Swedish pornography, the driver asked if he could show me the Rome he loved. THAT I wanted most to see!

First he showed me where he lived. Or at least a place similar to where he lived--one of the hundreds if not thousands of very ugly six-story apartment flats that ringed the city. Then he showed me where he wanted to live--what he was saving his money from driving a taxi for--and we went to what to my eyes was an even uglier part of the city: a sprawling suburb of Levittown-like "ticky tacky houses" each on a tiny lot in the midst of endless surrounding tackiness.

But the taxi driver thought that living there would be heaven.

That trip taught me a lot about the future, and the past--mainly that my very American ideas about a preferable future are not universally shared (neither by the people who attended the conference, nor by at least one taxi driver in Rome), while many of the things I found most unsatisfactory about American culture (certainly the middle class suburbs) were things that people in other parts of the world yearned for. I was not, and am still not, so sure that, once they got what they dreamed for, they were quite so pleased--yet another lesson about dreams and preferred futures.

Where I really got to know Eleonora and to see what a strong and gentle person she was--the very essence of Soft Power--was at the 1973 World Conference of the World Futures Studies Federation (held a year after the WFSF was formally created in Paris) that she arranged in a beautiful old villa in Frascati. The conference was a fitting successor to the huge Kyoto meeting in 1970, and featured most memorably for most of the attendees, I am certain, a lengthy meeting with Pope Paul VI who lectured us about the Church's teachings on Eschatology--the study of the end of things. His message, to put it simply, was "Don't worry. It's in God's hands". To me the most memorable of this memorable event, however, was when so many of the members of the WFSF--most intensely memorable of all, those from Socialist countries--crowded to kiss the Pope's hand and receive his blessing.

Was I impressed? I was impressed.

I was impressed by Eleonora who could command the attention of Popes and Communists alike, while gaining the affection and support of a lapsed Anglican *cum* hippie wannabe like me. I saw many a prince and potentate bow before her, and yet no ordinary person ever turned away, or was turned away by her.

The story has been told many times that while it was men like Johan Galtung, Robert Jungk, Bertrand de Jouvenel, James Wellesley-Wesley, Pavel Apostol, Peter Mencke-Gluckert, and Andrzej Sicinski who founded the WFSF, it was single-handedly Eleonora Masini who took it into her arms after the Founding Fathers had almost left it at an orphanage to die, and nurtured it back to life and strength.

She kept the names of the Federation members on file cards in a shoebox. She collected information from members and about futures activities worldwide, and composed, duplicated, and bound the WFSF Newsletter while her three boys helped affix the address labels and lick the stamps before taking them to the local post office for distribution worldwide.

Eleonora arranged an extraordinary educational opportunity at the University Centre for Postgraduate Studies in Dubrovnik, then Yugoslavia, now Croatia, from 1975 through 1991 (when the city was almost destroyed by shelling during the disintegration of Yugoslavia). The WFSF held a two-week course in futures studies every April that attracted students from communist as well as noncommunist countries. I taught, along with Eleonora, most years, and often brought a group of graduate students from the futures program at the University of Hawaii for whom a trip to Dubrovnik was like going from one paradise to another very different paradise, with a chance to meet with people from places they would never encounter otherwise, during those Cold War days.

Eleonora formally was elected Secretary General in 1975 while Galtung was President (followed in 1977 by Mahdi Elmandjra) and slowly and effectively created what we would now call a network, though many others including myself call it a family. She remained Secretary-General until 1981, when she became President. Goran Backstrand was her Secretary General from 1981-1983 and I followed him from 1983-1990. Eleonora was chair of the Executive Council from 1990-1993.

I of course can speak of Eleonora best about while we were working together.

I did my best to follow her good examples in every way I could, though while she is elegant, gracious, and well-connected, I am slovenly, informal and living on the most remote island on the globe (On learning of my election as Secretary General, one of the more esteemed European members said we might as well have elected someone on the Moon. I think he meant in more than just geographically).

The main thing I learned from Eleonora, that I tried to carry out even after I was President from 1990-1993, was to keep in as close personal touch with as many of the WFSF members as I possibly could.

Compared to now, that was not easy. But I think we did a pretty good job of it. Our main mode of communication was the ordinary mail. We both used "circular letters" which were general letters to the membership that we sent out as needed to keep the members informed, aware of impending conferences, and, on occasion, to vote on something.

But we also sent a lot of personal letters to members, just checking out what they were doing and asking them to mail to us any thing they had written that we could then report on in the WFSF Newsletter (I have several boxes full of those letters). The Newsletter was thus a vital source of communication among our members. I well remember Mircea Malitza saying to the WFSF General Assembly in Beijing in 1980 that "we read the WFSF Newsletter with pen in hand", jotting down ideas and names of members to contact.

However, mail between Honolulu and Rome was erratic at best. It seemed the Rome post office was constantly on strike, and so when we needed instant communication between us, we had to use the telephone.

But phoning too was no easy matter either! It was not a question of picking up a phone and dialing a long number, as it is now. It was a matter of somehow trying to arrange a time when we both would be available for a call, and then contacting a long distant operator to set up the circuits between us. And long distance calls were very expensive.

There was of course no such thing as email for most of the time I was Eleonora's Secretary General (and indeed, Eleonora resisted using it for extremely good political reasons). There was barely fax. When we began our collaboration, there was "thermal facsimile" (thermofax). In the case of Honolulu, if I wanted to send a fax to Eleonora in Rome, I had to type out a message, take the sheet of paper with the message on it to the only office in Honolulu that sent public faxes, and pay for it to be faxed to Rome. I believe Eleonora had to do something like the same in return.

So we eventually set up a system whereby she and I would fax each other a list of things we needed to talk about, and then I would phone her, and we would go through the lists every week on her Sunday evening, my Sunday morning.

Rome and Honolulu are at the antipodes. When it is 8 AM in Honolulu it is 8 PM the same day in Rome. When it is 8 PM in Honolulu, it is 8 AM the following morning in Rome.

The fax/phone system worked amazingly well, and we were somehow able to arrange many regional and world conferences for the Federation using only those antique modes of communication: World Conferences in Costa Rica, Honolulu, Beijing, Budapest, and Barcelona, and regional conferences in Zurich, Mexico, Bucharest, Buffalo, Nagoya, Sofia, and Islamabad were arranged by mail, fax and phone.

But that would be the way I tell the story--it is all about the technology.

The way Eleonora would tell it is by pointing out that whenever she traveled for whatever reason (and she traveled a lot), she tried to meet face-to-face with as many local WFSF members as possible--in train stations, airports, hotels, coffee shops--wherever a few WFSF members could congregate, she met with them and passed the word personally from each of us to all of us as only she could do.

The most amazing thing of all is that the WFSF was not her main work at all. First of all, she had a family to take care of--three lively boys, and the world's most loving, attentive, and supportive husband, Franco. Here, I would need to turn to my wife, Rosemary McShane, to tell the tales about Franco, because the two of them would often go off to see the sights of wherever we were while Eleonora and I went about our Federation business. I do know that Rosemary was as fond of Franco (who spoke limited English and she no Italian at all) as I am of Eleonora (who speaks English with an alluring mixture of Scottish/English and Italian, from her Scottish mother and Italian father--she an early feminist activist on a global scale, and he an officer in the Italian Navy. Eleonora herself was born in Guatemala).

Eleonora always created a little family shrine wherever she went, carefully arranging pictures of her family on whatever table or mantelpiece would hold them in whatever hotel or hovel we happened to be staying. She was totally devoted to her family, and they to her.

Of her sons, I only knew Federico. He was a Chinese specialist, and was posted by the Italian Government to Beijing during the time we were arranging the World Conference their in 1980. I stayed at Federico's flat on occasion and he helped us enormously with the arrangements. The WFSF has always been a family affair for everyone involved.

Eleonora's formal academic training was in law, especially constitutional law, and her main teaching job was as Professor of Futures Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, of the Gregorian University of Rome where she taught from 1976-2004. As such, she mentored many students from all over the world, not only Italy, but especially from Africa. She felt a special obligation to help inspire futures-oriented leadership in Africa and has many former students to show for it.

In addition, Eleonora was a prodigious scholar who contributed to many academic areas. I know best, of course, her voluminous contributions to futures studies including her very influential book about the theories and methods of futures studies, *Why Futures Studies?* (London: Grey Seal, 1993), and a book edited from several conferences sponsored by CEESTEM (Centro de Estudios Economicos Sociales del Tercer Mundo) in Mexico, *Alternative Visions of Desirable Societies*, (New York: Pergamon, 1982). She wrote extensively about the futures of cultures--cultural (rather than technological) issues being her main concern. She was chair of the Futures Research Committee of the International Sociological Association (1978-1997). And arranged the only book that the WFSF, *per se*, ever published (with a lot of help from Sam Cole): *Reclaiming the Future: A Manual for African Planners*, prepared for UNDP, and published by Tycooly International in London in 1986.

She also was an earlier and continuing contributor to the growing literature on women, usually but not always in a futures context, and most often focusing on women in third world situations. She did extensive field research on rural women in Africa, China, and

South America, sponsored by UNESCO and the United Nations University, among others.

She continues to be actively involved in research and publications to this day, and I feel somewhat awkward in writing these words about her since she is still so very much an inspiring "work in progress!"

I am so deeply indebted to Eleonora in so many ways that I cannot possibly thank her. I was already willing to be called and to call myself "a futurist" before I met her (while she always insisted she was a futures-oriented sociologist). But, even though I first encountered "the future" and began teaching futures courses while I was at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan for the first half of the 1960s, and even though Hawaii is culturally and politically very different from the rest of the United States (to which it was forcefully and illegally joined in 1898), I was very much an All American Boy until Eleonora and others invited me into the WFSF and I had the chance to see "the future" from the point of view of so many other cultures and perspectives.

I suppose I still seem like an All American Boy to the rest of the world, but Eleonora gave me the Light and Wings that I needed to transcend that a bit. Never once did she criticize me--or even hint at criticism--for any of the stupid and probably very embarrassing things I did while I was her Secretary General (or from which must have cringed when I followed her as President--from the sublime to the ridiculous, indeed!). She inspired me, as she inspired all, not by criticism and lecturing, but by her own quiet and supremely effective behavior.

Thank you, Eleonora, from a member of your loving global family.