

## Imagining Possible Futures 2030 When Driving Forces Interact



# SCENARIO C STORY CONTRIBUTION BY CONVERSATION 2012 PARTICIPANT



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# THE YEAR WE GAVE BACK

*Kay Edwards*

# Gary Hubbell Consulting *Conversation* 2012



## PARTICIPANT BIO

### **Kay Edwards**

President and CEO, Vesper Service Network

Kay Edwards is founder and CEO of the Vesper Service Network, an innovative social enterprise that connects not-for-profit organizations to the resources they need to thrive and grow, and brings people together around the common values of faith and service.

For more than 20 years, Kay has provided counsel in marketing research, planning, and organizational development to some of the largest not-for-profit organizations in the United States. She is a national leader in research among faith-based and denominational institutions, and has developed research models which enable organizations to learn and plan while respecting their unique culture and relationships with their constituents. Her work has been funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, and the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, among others.

Known by her clients and colleagues as “The Question Lady,” not-for-profit organizations call on Kay and the Vesper Service Network for her ability to ask important questions, bring clarity to complex situations, and create solutions that are both practical and impactful.

Prior to founding the Vesper Service Network, she founded and was managing partner of a unique, national consulting model that helped clients access new thinking resources, simplify consulting engagements, and manage costs. Under her leadership, the firm created four spin-off companies in partnership with its clients; led the design and launch of an innovative knowledge sharing and management information portal for an international association of foundations; and created new models for engaging donors with not-for-profit organizations.

Kay began her career as a communications specialist for a national cookware manufacturer, producing corporate training films and other communications vehicles. She has also worked as a research specialist and account executive for a regional advertising firm. She spent 14 years with Growth Design Corporation, a resource development consulting firm, as head of its research services, and 2 years as a member of its Executive Team, responsible for the firm’s service and team development and quality assurance.

She has served on the board of New Beginnings are Possible, an education and mentoring organization serving youth in Milwaukee’s inner city, is active in her church, and hosts HowToGiveBack.info, a blog on the meaning of grace in our lives.

Kay holds a music degree from Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, an MBA from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and has done graduate work in English/Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

This is Kay’s first *GHC Conversation*.

# The Year We Gave Back

By Kay Edwards

The year hadn't been such a bad one after all. Not like the year before when they had lost her father.

He was 91. He should never have lived that long. He was too big to be that old, too important for what was left of his body. Her mother liked to call him a freak of nature, "In a good way," she would say, because for so long he had defied the age that would make him smaller.

But in the end, even he had dried up, like the leaf on the bush outside her office window, the last one, that hung on when all of its brothers had fallen. But what good was that, really, just twisting there.

He was so old that the nurse at the hospital had asked his birthdate twice. People didn't live that long anymore. Even her mother, at 70, was beginning to be one of the older ones. Everyone had hope, everyone knew that the cures were just around the corner, just like they had been for as long as Noelle could remember, but somehow people died younger and from the same things they had died of when she was a girl.

Too old to treat, too old to waste the bed space, the antibiotics, the nurses' time, the things they needed for other patients, according to their rules. Except, maybe, they suggested, for a large donation, like a house, or a retirement savings, or a future share of wages, it couldn't be done, and sick as he was, as old as he was, her father reared up on the gurney and shouted, "No," in his deepest drill sergeant voice, or maybe he had just called her name, but he had startled the nurses, and they told her mother to take him home.

So they had managed to hold on to the house. Even that would not have bought more than a few more years for her father, and he never would have wanted that anyway. In the end, there was nothing they could do, nothing to be exchanged for something so dear as that.

She had worried about her mother in the weeks after her father died, worried that she would give up. On the day they buried him, she had watched her shrink as they had lowered his body, as if she were breathing him out, and the space left behind was collapsing in on itself. It was what her mother's family did, died together. Every generation added to the story, with one spouse dying when the other was gone, sometimes for no other reason than the effort to wake up without the other was too much work. It was why her mother cared so much that Noelle had never married, that there would be no opportunity to throw herself on the imaginary pyre of family tradition. She wondered, too, if her mother was annoyed at having to stay around to take care of her.

Her mother used to talk about the game she had played with her sister, when they were young, guessing what they would be doing in the year 2000, how old it seemed like they would be, like anything over 30 was something ancient, something to be slightly pitied. Now 2030 must seem like the end of the world to her.

She didn't quite know how circles had started, or where. She had read about it happening years before, of whole families sharing meals—nothing weird or cult-like—just a small group of neighbors who were tired of cooking every night and decided to cook once a week instead, for everyone.

Her mother had heard about one near them, and they had gone out of curiosity mostly, and the idea that they could help somehow, and her mother's distant memories of how things had been growing up on the farm, of always being sure that even if the worst happened you could take care of your own. No one took care of themselves anymore. Why would you?

When the circles first started people tried exchanging expensive things like jewelry or dishes. She had even looked once or twice at the yellow diamond that had belonged to her father's grandfather, the one passed down to her by her grandmother, passing over all of the older grandchildren, passing over all of the boys. But they could never quite figure out what to do with things like that, and before long no one would trade for them. She would get far more for her mother's fur coat, if it ever came to that, than she would for the ring.

They didn't need to belong, really, not like the ones who had lost their jobs, or gotten sick, or had exchanged their pensions for something they once thought they had needed, but they stayed because her mother made beautiful bread. Someone always wanted her pretty decorated cakes, or sweet jams, or the hand-knit socks made from llama wool, so warm and light. Noelle wished she had learned the things her mother had. All of the things she had thought there would be no time for, no place for in her bright world. Her name was Noelle, like the song of the angels, her mother had always told her, and it made her feel special, feel responsible for something, something she was forever looking for.

The organizations hated circles.

There were only about two dozen or so of them left, what people used to call nonprofits. No one knew that. No one cared. As long as the latest causes felt new. They made up names, they hired actors, sometimes even the disasters were just stories that had sounded good around some conference table. They raised hundreds of millions, much more than they had when anyone still worried about whether things were true or not.

They played a make-believe game of competition. Even the schools played it, played their parents against each other, for students, for donations, for pressure to be the best. No one knew they were all the same school, the same education, the same results. No one wanted

to know that, only to belong, and to have something different to rally around every week. Speed was the most important thing, and being first to know everything.

She remembered when she was growing up, when people thought technology would give everyone a voice. Instead it had given everyone the same voice, a chaotic, attention-starved, din of a voice that everyone followed, afraid to be left behind because they had nothing else to believe in but the sound of it and the desire to belong.

Everything changed so quickly. And everyone just went along with things, like a school of fish flashing from one side to another, never minding the things it was swimming around. There was no chance to think, no chance to consider, to wonder what had happened to the ideas they had the week before.

Without really meaning to, they had traded freedom for belonging, and after the freedom was gone, no one seemed to notice, or think that it had ever been something they might have wanted. They carried their thoughts and feelings with them on their devices, or more likely, not theirs at all, but only the things their devices told them to think and feel.

She of all people knew better, that the quickness and the brightness were just make-believe, something that she programmed for people to see and believe but never look behind, to see the sameness.

Once upon a time everyone had worried about the government taking over too much of their lives, but they had avoided that, and the tax revolt in 2015 had ended everything but the things only a government could do. Most of the governments had given up pretending, some more easily than others, that they cared what happened to the people, cared about anything other than comfort. But it was the Emotron that had finally proven it, finally put their thoughts and feelings out for everyone to see, and the only thing left to believe in was the organizations.

When she had first suggested it, she had been sure someone else was already working on it. It was what everyone wanted to know, what moved, what motivated, not just reading a mind, but reading a soul. It had been at least 20 years since those kids in the Valley had discovered a way to predict what people were going to do, really predict it, so well that they used the algorithm on parolees, knowing exactly what set of movements were taking them headlong to another crime, and intercepting them before they could get there.

Surely someone else had tried already to combine actions with some kind of biofeedback, but she suggested it anyway, and it was her team's algorithm, her idea of capturing everything around the device, the music playing on it, the background noise, the eye movements, the pauses between touches, that finally took. The music part had been her mother's idea, "the secret language of God," she had always called it. And it had worked. Eventually, when the last of the desktop machines and the land lines were gone, and



everyone carried their work and their life around on their devices, there was nothing left between the organizations who owned the magic and the people who fell under it. It wasn't so much that they controlled you, more like you couldn't wait to be controlled, to do everything you could to belong, so enticing had they made everything seem, so accurately could they predict what you were going to believe.

Now some of the really big businesses, and most of the small ones, were disappearing, as more and more, people only wanted to buy from the organizations. No one had understood that what seemed like a good solution might actually have been something they should have also feared.

The smart ones, the rich ones, caught on first, and bought what they needed, bought their freedom, even as they pretended to support the causes. For everyone else, the first flooded basement, the first college tuition, anything more complicated than a broken leg, meant choosing between comfort and control. Sure, you get what you needed most of the time, but you gave up the opportunity to take care of yourself, the opportunity to fail. Was it better to be owned by the government or Catholic Social Services? She didn't know.

Eventually there were only two kinds of people, the ones who knew they had lost everything to the organizations, and the ones who didn't.

In the early days working for the organizations had seemed like the right thing to do, the thing she had been meant to do. She told herself she would quit when her mother died, when she no longer had to take care of her, but she knew that when her mother died there would just be more fear, more reasons than ever to keep working for them.

She had begun to worry, when she was out, especially when she was driving, that things would just fly apart, and she held on hard to the steering wheel, catching glimpses of broken pieces out of the corner of her eye, and wondered how it could be that she was the only one who looked at the road and saw the horror flying past.

She knew a few people who had left, just gone away. She had been afraid to ask them to write, wondering if there was anyplace anymore where that could happen, where someone could craft thoughts of their own.

A few people in her circle had dared to stop using their devices completely, although she couldn't quite imagine how that would work for her. For months after her father died, she had carefully chosen the moments when she used her device, careful not to let her mind wander, not slip into the rage that would bring any attention.

Their circle had grown, but not so much that it attracted attention. There were some, even, who lived almost entirely off what they could trade or sell in the circle, and after her mother had convinced the woman with the llamas to join, and then a few other farmers came once



in a while, it got easier. That was the key, to have enough people in the circle who had things you could use, and enough people who still had money to pay for them.

She heard rumors that in some parts of the country, even doctors had begun to join, and do simple things, in exchange for something they wanted, but it was hard for her to imagine them wanting anything they couldn't already buy, and she never heard of any doctors in circles around here, so she thought it must not be true.

So every Thursday they went, not because they needed anything, but because her mother would have a fresh batch of cookies to trade, and Noelle would sit behind her, watching, thinking all the while, "If only they knew."

It was no big thing to work for the organizations. Everyone did, or would eventually. Her mother always said it would have happened anyway, that anything she had done was just something someone else would have figured out. Still, she never really told them what she did. And every time someone new joined the circle, every time someone gave more than they could afford to an organization, or bought too much, and especially when they gave up things they had really wanted to keep, it was like the first time she had understood that instead of being special, she was just responsible.

Finally it was only him who kept her coming back to the circle, the idea of his perfect calmness.

He was the only one who carried his device all the time, even to the circle, like it was something that didn't really matter to him. He was the only one who didn't seem to care what anyone thought, like he couldn't be owned, and when he shook back his long hair, it was like he was shaking off the world. He looked untouchable, like she imagined her father would have looked, if he had been that young at just the right time, when there was nothing left to do but push your way into an odd kind of freedom.

He put things together, as if from nothing sometimes. Everything he made was strong and clean, and beautiful, things that didn't need anything else to make them work. His circle worked that way too, the deals coming together so that everyone had what they needed, not too much, not too little. It was why he led the circle, why they trusted him, why he held his head differently than any of the rest of them. Even her breathing seemed slower when she was near him. Once, she had seen him quietly give a whole week's worth of food, something he had just traded for, to a family who had come to the circle with nothing to give.

Who knows why he did it that night? Who knows what started it? Who knows what he was feeling, except he seemed to be looking straight at her, hiding in the back row, while he held his device over his head. And then he started quietly, absently dismantling it, as if his hands were working by themselves, peeling the pieces apart, the screen protector, the

battery, the buttons, which seemed to come off too easily, giving up with so little effort. Even the Emotron recorded only calm, right up until he pulled it out of the back of the device. She watched it come out, fall on the floor, wondered how long it would try to keep going, as if by some magical power it could record the fear, the joy, the hope that hung around them, as if she could see it beating.

Giving it up meant disappearing from the crowd. Maybe someone, sometime would wonder where you had gone. Destroying it meant someone, somewhere would know you were gone, and hunt for ways to get you back. In that simple act, she realized, he had plunged them down the road to rebellion, the road to love, the real kind, not the stuff based on what people cared about. Love greater than fear.

She jumped into the circle and smashed the Emotron under her heel. She didn't know why. She stood and looked around her, surprised at what she had done. And then she knew it was over, knew she would wake up the next morning and use her device one more time to tell her boss she was leaving, and then there would be no more fear, no more driving down the road imagining that things were flying apart, no more hiding, only redemption and love.