

Method Paper

Genomics, Healthcare & You

Krznaric, R. (2020). The Good Ancestor:
How to think long term in a short-term
world. W.H. Allen.

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Introduction

At People Street, our work on Genomics, Healthcare & You is grounded in a simple belief: the decisions we make today must honour and protect future generations. We draw on Roman Krznaric's *The Good Ancestor* to guide our long-term approach, rooting our methodology in community wisdom, intergenerational responsibility, and design justice.

Genomics is not just about science or personal health. It shapes family stories, cultural identity, community futures, and the rights of generations yet to be born. That means we cannot approach this work with “short-term thinking” or quick fixes. We must slow down, listen deeply, and consider the long-term impact of policies, data practices, and healthcare decisions on people’s children, grandchildren, and future communities.

The modern world is shaped by what Krznaric calls the “tyranny of the now”: rapid news cycles, instant gratification, immediate profits, short-term thinking. This short-termism underlies many of our biggest collective problems: environmental destruction, climate change, unsustainable use of resources, social inequality and could also include how we make decisions about technologies that will affect future generations (like genomics in healthcare).

We seldom pause to think: “What will the world look like in 50, 100, or 500 years if we carry on this way?” Instead, decisions are often made for immediate benefit, often neglecting long-term consequences.

Krznaric argues for a shift: we need to recover our capacity for long-term thinking, to become “good ancestors” who care about and take responsibility for the future, not just for today. So rather than being a book about despair, *The Good Ancestor* is a call to arms, to shift mindsets, reshape our relationship with time, and reorient how we make decisions individually, collectively, and institutionally.

The vision: adopting long-term thinking

Krznaric points out that long-term thinking is not new or utopian. Throughout history, people have done it: from building the pyramids to the sewers of Victorian London, from large public works to social reforms.

To do that, he identifies six complementary mindsets or “ways” to think long term:

01 Deep-Time Humility

Recognising that on Earth’s timeline, our lives are a tiny moment — and our actions ripple far beyond our own lifespan. This helps us see that our responsibility stretches to future generations.

02 Legacy Mindset

Instead of focusing just on personal gain or immediate reward, we ask: “What positive legacy do we want to leave behind for our children, grandchildren, communities, humanity?”

03 Intergenerational Justice

Future generations have rights too: rights to a livable world, access to opportunities, fair treatment. We must design policies and systems that respect those rights now.

04 Cathedral Thinking

Some projects or decisions should be undertaken even if their benefits may only fully emerge long after we are gone, like building cathedrals took centuries, or planting forests that will mature over generations. It’s about long-term vision and commitment.

05 Holistic Forecasting

Thinking systemically: anticipating potential long-term consequences- social, ecological, ethical, not just short-term gains or narrow metrics. Considering complexity and multiple dimensions of future impact.

06 Transcendent Goals

Framing aims that go beyond short-term profit or self-interest to goals that are collective, ecological, ethical, existential: for humanity, for communities, for future generations.

Why “The Good Ancestor” matters for People Street?

How we can use the approach in the the Genomics, Healthcare & You project?

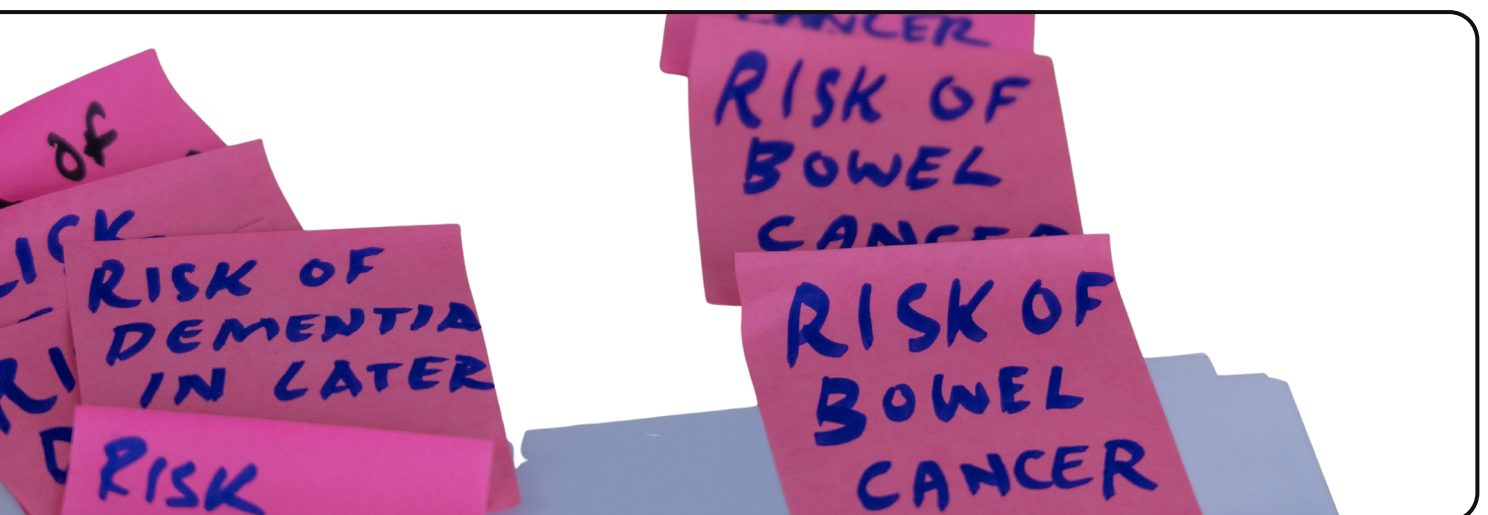
At People Street, we campaign for Design Justice. We work from principles of inclusion, equity, community voice, long-term empowerment. Using The Good Ancestor as a foundational framework helps us root the project in long-term, future-focused justice. Here are 4 reasons we have adopted this approach:

01 Design Justice + Long-Term Thinking = Accountability to Future Generations

Design justice demands that communities, especially those historically marginalised, have a meaningful say in how systems, technologies and services are designed, implemented and governed.

For a genomics project, where choices may affect not only people alive today but their children, grandchildren, and unborn generations, we owe it to those future people to engage in deep, inclusive deliberation. A “legacy mindset” and “intergenerational justice” which is central to The Good Ancestor spotlight exactly this responsibility.

Thinking long-term helps shift from reactive or project-by-project work to sustaining community health equity over generations. Rather than only considering immediate benefits (e.g. research uptake, short-term funding cycles), we can ask: “What kind of biological, social and health legacy do we want to leave for our grandchildren and generations beyond?”



02 Language matters:

Reframing how we talk about change, impact and responsibility

Using the metaphors and language from The Good Ancestor can help ground conversations with communities in time and shared responsibility.

For example:

- Instead of “users” or “patients,” we speak of “future ancestors”, invoking continuity, responsibility, and belonging across generations.
- Using words like “legacy,” “shared stewardship,” “future lineage” when describing genomics, data, and health decisions. This language helps shift thinking away from short-termism and towards care, dignity, and collective responsibility.

Frame questions as: “What do we want to leave behind?” or “How will this decision shape the lives of our children and grandchildren?”

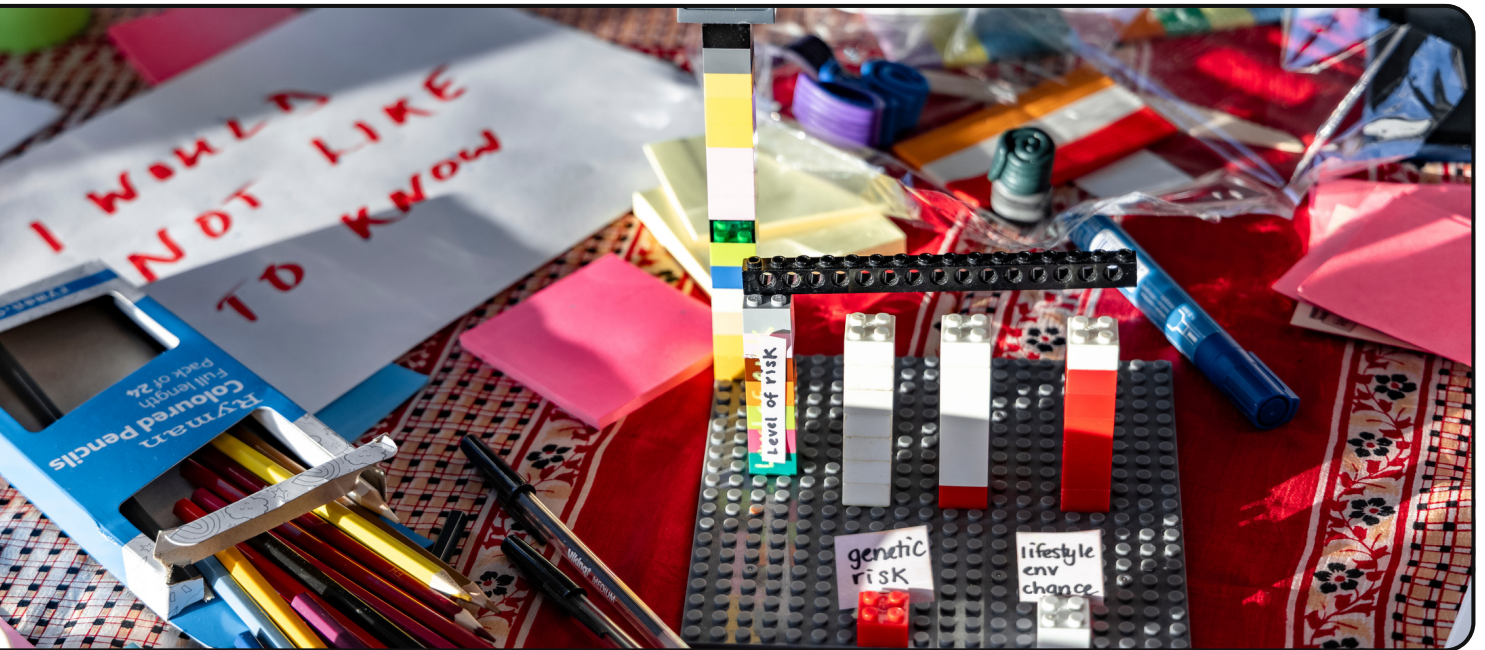
This helps people step outside the present moment and consider long-term consequences, not just for themselves, but for their descendants.

03 Rooting methodology in community, not experts first

Often, decisions about genomics, data and future health are framed by experts, technologists, researchers or policymakers.

Using the good ancestor approach reminds us that communities, especially under-heard voices, must be at the centre.

- Engage communities not just as participants but as co-designers of long-term visions.
- Use inclusive, culturally attuned engagement to surface values about health, privacy, legacy, identity, consent and what responsibility to future generations means in their context.
- Co-create long-term plans that are responsive to their needs, hopes, fears, imagining what legacy they want to leave for their children.



04 Decolonising Futures and Power.

Why “Good Ancestor” thinking resonates with us

As the book argues, in modern democracies and economies we have in effect “colonised the future”. Future generations have no vote, no representation, yet decisions today profoundly affect them.

This is especially true when decisions are made by policy makers and service designers, without inclusive community engagement. If we don’t democratise long-term planning, we risk replicating colonial patterns: those with power decide what happens, while future generations, especially from racialised and minoritised communities, bear the consequences. This underlines why decolonising long-term planning is important. The language in the book, and its emphasis on intergenerational justice, aligns with calls for more equitable, participatory governance of future-shaping decisions.

Using “good ancestor” thinking in community engagement helps centre voices that are often sidelined, not just in the “now,” but in shaping their future and that of their descendants. This is a powerful stance for a Design Justice-rooted, community-led organisation like People Street.

What this means in practice?

Long-term thinking means taking a legacy mindset.

We ask communities:

“What kind of world do you want your descendants to inherit?”

“How should genomics serve, not harm future generations?”

These conversations matter because the systems surrounding genetics and data have historically been shaped without the voices of the people most affected. This mirrors wider patterns of exclusion and colonial decision-making, where power sits at the top and communities are expected to accept whatever emerges.

Community-led long-term thinking challenges this.

It decolonises the process by shifting power back to families, neighbourhoods and cultural groups who hold their own histories, beliefs, and hopes for the future.

Using principles from *The Good Ancestor*, we structure the project around:

- Deep-time thinking – helping people explore how genomic decisions ripple across generations.
- Intergenerational justice – ensuring the rights and wellbeing of future people guide our choices today.
- Cathedral thinking – building processes and community knowledge that grow over time, not just for the length of a project.
- Holistic forecasting – imagining the different futures genomics could create, especially for marginalised groups.
- Transcendent goals – focusing not just on uptake or outcomes, but on dignity, agency, and long-term community empowerment.

Our language reflects this shift. We avoid technical jargon and speak instead about *heritage, community benefit, fairness, shared responsibility, and futures*.

Communities are co-creators of a future that belongs to them. Together, we explore how genomics can support health equity while protecting cultural identity, strengthening trust, and leaving behind a legacy we are proud of.

By using this long-term, justice-focused approach, we ensure that genomics in the UK is shaped with communities, not for them, and that the voices of today act in service of the generations to come. **This is how we become good ancestors, and how we build a healthcare future rooted in inclusion, humanity and hope.**

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