

Considering Spirituality

INTEGRAL SPIRITUALITY, DEEP SCIENCE, AND ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS

by *Thomas P. Maxwell*

Abstract. There is a growing understanding that addressing the global crisis facing humanity will require new methods for knowing, understanding, and valuing the world. Narrow, disciplinary, and reductionist perceptions of reality are proving inadequate for addressing the complex, interconnected problems of the current age. The pervasive Cartesian worldview, which is based on the metaphor of the universe as a machine, promotes fragmentation in our thinking and our perception of the cosmos. This divisive, compartmentalized thinking fosters alienation and self-focused behavior. I aim to show in this essay that healing the fragmentation that is at the root of the current world crises requires an integrated epistemology that embraces both the rational knowledge of scientific empiricism and the inner knowledge of spiritual experience. This “deep science” transcends the illusion of separateness to discern the unity, the unbroken wholeness, that underlies the diverse forms of the universe. Our perception of connectedness, of our integral place in the web of life, emerges as an attribute of our connection with the eternal, beatific source of all existence. This awakened spiritual vision “widens our circle of understanding and compassion, to embrace all living creatures in the whole of nature” (Einstein, quoted in Goldstein [1976] 1987). Our behavior, as it emerges naturally out of our perception of the sacredness of the natural world, will naturally embody love and respect for all life forms. This vision promotes the healing of our long-standing alienation from the natural world and offers hope for renewal in the midst of widespread cultural deterioration and environmental destruction.

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[*Zygon*, vol. 38, no. 2 (June 2003).]

© 2003 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

Keywords: awakening; awareness; consciousness; contemplative spirituality; ecological; emergent; enlightenment; fragmentation; holistic; holographic; holomovement; idealist; implicate order; integration; materialism; modern physics; modern science; mystic; mystical; perennial philosophy; quantum mechanics; salvation; scientific materialism; spirituality; Sufism; synthesis; transcendental; transpersonal; transrational; unity; worldview.

INTRODUCTION: A CRISIS OF PERCEPTION

The scale of human enterprise has become so large that it is now threatening to seriously degrade or destroy the life-support systems that sustain it (see www.worldwatch.org). Humanity is driving changes in a number of very complex systems (ecological and economic, for example) that are interacting in complex and often unpredictable ways with potentially disastrous consequences. “Individually there has developed a widespread feeling of helplessness and despair, in the face of what seems to be an overwhelming mass of disparate social forces, going beyond the control and even the comprehension of the human beings who are caught up in it” (Bohm 1982). In many parts of the world these problems have become crises, and many are convinced that the decisions we make as a society at this critical point will have a major impact on the quality (or possibility) of life for future generations.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the major problems facing humanity—overpopulation, poverty, inequity, resource depletion, biodiversity loss, ethnic conflicts, environmental degradation, crime, and social decay—are interconnected and interdependent. They are systemic problems that are impossible to address in isolation; they require an integration and transcendence of existing boundaries of knowledge (Costanza et al. 1997; Capra 1996; 1982; Bohm 1982). Physicist Fritjof Capra observes that “ultimately these problems must be seen as just different facets of one single crisis, which is largely a crisis of perception. It derives from the fact that most of us, and especially our large social institutions, subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview, a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our overpopulated, globally interconnected world” (1996, 4). The pervasive Cartesian worldview of scientific materialism, which views the cosmos as a vast machine composed of independent, externally related pieces (Capra 1982), promotes fragmentation in our thinking and perception.

Physicist David Bohm asserts that the root cause of this crisis of perception lies in our habit of seeing and experiencing ourselves and our world as constituted of separately existent fragments. “The notion that all these fragments are separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion. Indeed, the attempt to live according to the notion that the fragments are really sepa-

rate is, in essence, what has led to the growing series of extremely urgent crises that is confronting us today.” This fragmentation is “continually being brought about by the almost universal habit of taking the content of our thought for a description of the world as it is” (Bohm 1982, 2). The differences and distinctions that pervade our thinking are taken to be real divisions of an external world, so that the world is experienced as actually broken up into fragments.

Alfred North Whitehead describes the effect of this “error of misplaced concreteness” on the development of the discipline of economics, observing that “it riveted on men a certain set of abstractions which were disastrous in their effect on modern mentality” (1925, 200). Herman Daly and John Cobb (1989) describe a number of these misleading abstractions in detail, including the conceptualizations of nature as “land,” humans as “homo economicus,” social dynamics as “market,” and social welfare as “GNP.” The field of ecological economics is dedicated to addressing these errors by assuming a “broad, *ecological*, interdisciplinary, and holistic view of the problem of studying and managing our world” (Costanza 1989; emphasis added).

This divisive, compartmentalized thinking creates alienation and self-focused behavior. Albert Einstein explains that

a human being is part of the whole called by us “universe.” A part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires, and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of understanding and compassion, to embrace all living creatures in the whole of nature and its beauty. (quoted in Goldstein [1976] 1987)

This widening of our “circle of understanding and compassion” requires a new mode of perception that transcends the illusion of separateness to discern the unity, the unbroken wholeness, from which emerge the diverse forms of existence. This awakened perception gives rise to a more integrative, holistic, and *ecological* perception of the cosmos. Capra asserts that this emerging holistic worldview, which he calls “deep ecological awareness,” “recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature” (1996, 6). Although this vision can be elaborated through science, its principal grounding is in spiritual experience. It will require an integrated epistemology that embraces both the rational knowledge of scientific empiricism and the inner knowledge of spiritual experience.

Ultimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual or religious awareness. When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence.

It is not surprising that the emerging new vision of reality based on deep ecological awareness is consistent with the so-called Perennial Philosophy of spiritual traditions, whether we talk about the spirituality of Christian mystics, that of Buddhists, or the philosophy and cosmology underlying the Native American traditions. (Capra 1996, 7)

This “deep ecological awareness” fosters a vision of the cosmos as fundamentally sacred. I describe herein the contributions of both modern science and contemplative spirituality to this ecological vision, coming to the conclusion that spiritual awakening promotes a profound sense of earth stewardship that can form the foundation of a new ecological ethic.

THE TURNING POINT: A CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

We live in a culture whose understanding of life, consciousness, and human affairs has been rooted for centuries in the worldview of classical physics, which describes the cosmos as a vast machine. Whitehead (1925) explains that

the mentality of an epoch springs from the view of the world which is, in fact, dominant in the educated sections of the communities in question. The various human interests which suggest cosmologies, and are also influenced by them, are science, aesthetics, ethics, and religion. . . . [A person's] effective outlook will be the joint production from these sources. But each age has its dominant preoccupation, and in the last three centuries the cosmology derived from science has been asserting itself at the expense of older points of view with their origins elsewhere.

There is increasing awareness that our society is approaching a turning point, a shift away from the mechanistic worldview of classical physics. Pitirim Sorokin, “the world’s greatest sociologist” (Zimmerman 1968), has characterized social dynamics in terms of the cyclical waxing and waning of two basic value systems that underlie all manifestations of a culture, which he calls the *sensate* and the *ideational* (Sorokin 1941; 1957). The *sensate* value system, characteristic of scientific materialism, views matter alone as the ultimate reality, all ethical values as relative, and sensory perception as the only source of knowledge and truth. The *ideational* value system holds that ultimate reality lies beyond the material world in a spiritual realm, that ethics, truth, and beauty are expressions or reflections of attributes of this transcendent reality, and that knowledge may be obtained through inner experience.

We are seemingly between two epochs: the dying *sensate* culture of our magnificent yesterday and the coming *ideational* culture of the creative tomorrow. We are living, thinking, and acting at the end of a brilliant six-hundred-year-long *sensate* day. . . . The present crisis represents only a disintegration of the *Sensate* form of Western society and culture, to be followed by a new integration as notable in its own way as was the *sensate* form in the days of its glory and climax. (Sorokin 1941)

Sorokin’s tremendously detailed analysis indicates that, since the dawn of history, Western culture has fluctuated between *sensate* and *ideational*

phases. In each of these phases, generally lasting for several centuries, one of the two value systems dominates in most aspects of human culture. He also notes that during the transition phase between predominately sensate and predominately ideational cultures, typically a chaotic period characterized by an increase in violence and cultural upheaval, there may arise a third phase, which he calls “idealistic.” The idealistic phase represents the harmonic balance of the sensate and ideational, the blossoming of human culture in the harmonious balance of opposites—inner and outer, material and spiritual, relative and absolute.

The twentieth century saw the beginnings of the decline of sensate culture. In Sorokin’s analysis, our current cultural upheavals can be viewed as symptoms of this cultural transformation. The shift from the sensate/materialistic to an ideational/idealist worldview is evidenced—in addition to the multitude of cultural factors analyzed by Sorokin—in the transition from classical to modern physics. In the eyes of the vast majority of the dozen or so scientific pioneers responsible for the twin revolutions of relativity and quantum theory, modern physics dealt a death blow to the sensate worldview (i.e., scientific materialism). These scientists were united in the belief that, at the most fundamental level, the basic substance of the cosmos is not material particles but a form of mind or spirit that includes consciousness as an elemental attribute (Wilber 1984). They stressed the importance of transrational experience in the formation of our preanalytic vision, the perceptual filters and conceptual constructs that largely determine our worldview. I examine in the following sections some of the aspects of this cultural transformation that may contribute to the emergence of an ecological worldview.

The Emergence of Modern Science. The emergence of modern physics in the twentieth century triggered a revolution in thinking that initiated a fundamental paradigm shift in our understanding of the nature of matter and its relation to the human mind (Kafatos and Nadeau 2000; Capra 1982; 1996; 2000) and heralded the transition from sensate to idealistic culture. In the face of the inscrutable mysteries of the atomic and subatomic world, physicists came to realize that their basic concepts, language, and preanalytic vision were inadequate for understanding the implications of their experimental results. Physicist Sir James Jeans (quoted in Wilber 1984) summarizes this new understanding:

All the pictures which science now draws of nature are mathematical pictures. . . . They are nothing more than pictures, fictions if you like, if by fiction you mean that science is not yet in contact with ultimate reality. Many would hold that, from the broad philosophical standpoint, the most outstanding achievement of 20th century physics . . . is the general recognition that we are not yet in contact with ultimate reality. We are still imprisoned in our cave, with our backs to the light, and can only watch the shadows on the wall.

In the view of physicist and Nobel laureate Erwin Schrödinger, “the scientific picture of the real world around me is very deficient. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us . . . we do not belong to the material world the science constructs for us” (quoted in Wilber 1984, 81). Schrödinger asserts that we lie outside of the scientific picture of the world; we only think we belong to it because our bodies are in it. Physicist and philosopher Sir Arthur Eddington asserts that the business of science is to “study the linkage of pointer readings with pointer readings” (Eddington 1929, quoted in Wilber 1984). Science has nothing to say regarding the intrinsic/essential nature of its objects of study. In the words of Ken Wilber, “the language of science is only an ‘it-language, with no conscious, no interiors, no values, no meaning, no depth, and no Divinity” (1998, 56).

Numerous contemporary physicists and philosophers (Bohm 1982; Kafatos and Nadeau 2000; Harris 1988; Laszlo 1995; 1999), in an attempt to develop a worldview that is consistent with the modern understanding of the nature of matter and energy, have converged on a view of the universe that is fundamentally holistic. In this view the essential nature of the universe is unbroken wholeness, and “ordinary notions of space and time, along with those of separately existent material particles, are abstracted as forms derived from the deeper order.” Menas Kafatos and Robert Nadeau (2000) explain that “the whole whose existence is inferred in experiments testing Bell’s theorem cannot be fully disclosed or described by physical theory and that the parts exist in some sense within this whole . . . we are confronted with a fundamental reality that exists completely outside the domain of physics.” Moreover, this holism is not simply referring to a network of external relationships; the unbroken wholeness is reflected in the fundamental “internal” nature of each entity. Bohm emphasizes that “the dynamic activity—internal and external—which is fundamental to what each part is, is based on its enfoldment of all the rest, including the whole universe . . . each part is in a fundamental sense internally related in its basic activities to the whole and to all the other parts” (1987, 12). In this interpretation of quantum mechanics, each quantum of “explicate” space-time emerges from a vast, unmanifest whole, or “implicate order.”

These physicists and philosophers have suggested that life and consciousness should be viewed as grounded in the whole rather than the parts. Bohm (1982) has proposed that consciousness be viewed as a fundamental aspect of the “holomovement,” that is, the dynamics of the implicate order. In this context, individual consciousness can be viewed as a manifestation of the universal consciousness, and evolution can be seen as a creative process of progressive manifestation of the attributes of universal consciousness in the form of life and mind. Since human consciousness is the most

fully articulated expression of universal consciousness, Kafatos and Nadeau (2000), following Ed Harris (1988), have suggested that “human consciousness may fold within itself the fundamental logical principle of the conscious universe.”

These scientists observe that the fact that this whole cannot be a direct object of scientific inquiry or knowledge “does not mean that science invalidates the prospect that we can apprehend this wholeness on a level that is prior to conscious constructs,” that is, through spiritual experiences, which involve “acts of communion with the whole” (2000, 159). Although scientific knowledge allows us to infer the existence of the single significant whole, it cannot fully affirm or prove its existence. However, if these scientists are correct in asserting that “human consciousness may fold within itself the fundamental logical principle of the conscious universe,” then the attributes of this whole may be apprehended through a form of inner “knowledge-by-identity.”¹ Integrating these spiritual modes of knowing with scientific empiricism can produce a more balanced, ecological vision of the cosmos, as described in the following sections.

Epistemology of Inner Knowledge. Saint Bonaventure taught that humans possess at least three different modes of knowing: the “eye of the flesh” (i.e., the physical senses), which discloses the material world; the “eye of the mind” (the rational faculty), which discloses the symbolic, conceptual world, and the “eye of contemplation” (the spiritual faculty), which discloses the spiritual, transcendental, transpersonal world. These three worlds are not separate—they represent three different aspects of the one cosmos, revealed by different modes of perception (Wilber 1983; 1998). Similar ideas can be found in virtually all of the major religions and schools of traditional philosophy (Wilber 1980; Smith 1976; Schuon 1975).

This teaching holds that each of these “eyes” discloses its own truths in its own realm, and none of them can be reduced to the others. The physical sciences are grounded in the observations of the eye of the flesh. Similarly, we can view the “spiritual sciences”—represented by the esoteric/contemplative schools of the major religions—as being grounded in the perceptions of the eye of contemplation. Ian Barbour, in describing the parallels between the structure of religion and the structure of science, has asserted that both science and religion are grounded in data and that both make propositions that can be assessed on the basis of their agreement with the data. “The data for a religious community consist of the distinctive experiences of individuals” (1990, 36). Barbour labels the most common forms of spiritual experience “numinous experience of the holy” and the “mystical experience of unity.” He describes the latter as “the experience of the unity of all things, found in the depth of the individual soul and in the world of nature. Unity is achieved in the discipline of meditation and is characterized by joy, harmony, serenity, and peace. In its extreme

form the unity can be described as selflessness and loss of individuality and the joy as bliss or rapture.”

According to contemplatives, spiritual awakening changes our perception of the cosmos by progressively attuning us to more profound levels of understanding (Wilber 1980), or “higher grades of significance” (Schumacher 1977). When we approach the transpersonal disciplines without the requisite contemplative training, the more subtle, profound, state-specific aspects tend to be overlooked. Roger Walsh explains that “when we cannot comprehend the higher grades of significance, we can blithely believe that we have fully understood something whose true significance we have completely missed” (1993, 225). Edward F. Schumacher describes a hierarchic structure of instruments or faculties by which the human being perceives and gains knowledge of the world. Perceiving the higher levels or grades of significance requires the higher faculties: “if we do not have the requisite organ or instrument, or fail to use it, we are not adequate to this particular part or facet of the world with the result, as far as we are concerned, it simply does not exist.” Our instruments of perception must be adequate to the level of significance of the realm of study: “all levels of significance up to the adequate level are equally factual, equally logical, equally objective, but not equally real. When the level of the knower is not adequate to the level (or the grade of significance) of the object of knowledge, the result is not factual error but something much more serious: an inadequate and impoverished view of reality” (Schumacher 1977, 42).

These transrational modes of knowing may be able to provide insight into facets of reality, or “higher levels of significance,” which are inaccessible to the measuring apparatus of science. Some physicists suggest that the all-pervasive wholeness, whose existence can be inferred empirically but which lies completely outside the domain of physics, may be accessible within the realm of human consciousness through “acts of communion with the whole,” that is, using the spiritual faculties (Kafatos and Nadeau 2000; Wilber 1984). This realization has fueled a renewed appreciation among scientists for the importance of transrational forms of knowledge. Nobel laureate Wolfgang Pauli, arguably one of the most insightful physicists of the twentieth century, predicted that the development of a “synthesis embracing both rational understanding and the mystical experience of unity” will prove to be one of the keystone issues of our time (Heisenberg 1974, 38; Wilber 1984).

Pauli’s proposed synthesis will require the development of a “deep science” that embraces both the rational knowledge of scientific empiricism and the inner knowledge of spiritual experience. It will require that, in addition to sensory experience and its empiricism and mental experience and its rationalism, we add spiritual experience and its mysticism (spiritual practice and its experiential data). In defense of this controversial third form of empiricism, Sir Arthur Eddington has argued that “those who in

the search for truth start from consciousness as a seat of self-knowledge with interests and responsibilities not confined to the material plane are just as much facing the hard facts of experience as those who start from consciousness as a device for discerning pointer readings" (Eddington 1929, quoted in Wilber 1984).

Wilber (1983) has pioneered the development of a "deep scientific method" that incorporates spiritual practice and its experiential data. He asserts that we can accept as valid all knowledge claims that can be verified using the following three-stage method:

1. *Injunction*: The "Do this!" strand of knowledge acquisition. In this stage the investigator develops the faculties that are adequate to the realm of study and then makes an observation under specified conditions.

2. *Apprehension*: An immediate experience of data brought forth by the injunction. In the physical sciences this would involve the perception of some aspect of the physical world with one's physical senses, perhaps augmented by instruments. In the spiritual realm it would involve the direct perception of aspects of reality using the spiritual faculties developed in the previous stage.

3. *Communal confirmation (or rejection)*: A checking of one's observations with others who have adequately completed the injunctive and apprehensive strands.

This approach emphasizes the empirical grounding of spiritual knowledge in spiritual experience. It also follows that we are not qualified to challenge the truth claims of either science or spirituality until we have completed the injunctive and apprehensive stages of the appropriate validation method. In the words of Evelyn Underhill (1974), a distinguished authority on mysticism, "mystics are the pioneers of the spiritual world, and we have no right to deny validity to their discoveries, merely because we lack the opportunity or the courage necessary to those who would prosecute such explorations for themselves." In this light mysticism reveals itself to be the spiritual science of essence, absolutes, and unity, an essential complement to the material sciences (such as physics, chemistry, and biology) of substance, relativity, and multiplicity.

INTEGRAL SPIRITUALITY

I defend the assertion that spiritual experience provides the base data of the spiritual quest and that the mystics of the world have been mapping the features of the spiritual world and attempting to express these inexpressible insights in music, poetry, and discourse. Interpretations of these experiences become codified into religious doctrine. "Theological doctrines start as human interpretations of individual and communal experience" (Barbour 1990, 183). An intuitive sense of the unity of religious ideals inspires us to seek an integral framework that transcends and integrates the multitude of apparently incommensurate spiritual worldviews.

The observation that mysticism is substantially the same in different cultures and religions supports the view that a single, universal numinous experience underlies all the major world religions (James [1902] 1982; Underhill 1974; Marechal [1927] 1985; Johnston 1970; Pratt 1923; Stace [1960] 1987; Huxley 1945; Smith 1976; Schuon 1975; Otto 1960). “The numinous experience of the holy is present in virtually all cultures. People around the world report a sense of awe and wonder in the presence of powers that seem to transcend the human . . . the experience carries a strong conviction of a transcendent unity beyond ordinary experience” (Barbour 1990, 202). The unity of spiritual experience underlying the diversity of religious expressions has been emphasized: “Since interpretive categories (e.g. concepts, beliefs, the background set) do not enter the transcendental experience, mysticism is by and large transculturally homogenous, having a small number of ‘core characteristics’ that could, indeed, should be analyzed independent of any specific culturally bound mystical philosophies” (Forman 1990). The various religions can be seen as emerging out of this universal vision as specific instantiations customized to particular cultural environments. The formative role of culture in human perception and the necessity of a plurality of worldviews has also been emphasized. John Hick asserts that the divine reality can be encountered, conceptualized, and responded to in many ways: “God has many names.” Each individual’s experience of the Divine Ground is partial and culturally relative. “These different human awarenesses of the Eternal One represent different culturally conditioned perceptions of the same infinite divine reality” (1982, 52).

An integral spirituality will recognize the universal transcendent core of the world’s spiritual traditions while simultaneously embracing the multiplicity of religious practices and beliefs. It will provide an integrating framework, grounded in spiritual experience, that unites the disparate theological systems by representing each as a unique but partial view of the same infinite divine reality. There is evidence that the universality of this numinous experience is reflected in a number of transcultural core characteristics that could support an integral spiritual vision (Stace [1960] 1987; Huxley 1945; Smith 1976; Schuon 1975). Our quest for wholeness requires us to attempt a formulation of this integral vision while acknowledging that any conceptual formulation will necessarily be an incomplete and distorted map of Reality.

Essentially all of the perennial philosophers,² in seeking a framework that encompasses and integrates the widest expanse of spiritual knowledge, have chosen some form of the “great chain of being” as their foundational principle. This worldview “has, in one form or another, been the dominant official philosophy of the large part of civilized mankind through most of its history” (Lovejoy [1936] 1964, 26). In the West, its roots can be found in the teachings of Plato, and its blossoming in the teaching of

Plotinus. No other philosophical or theological system has had such a profound and widespread impact on Western thinking (as Whitehead [1925] has observed, “the safest general characterization of the whole western philosophic tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato”). As the “great chain” philosophy was reaching maturity in the West around the second to third century C.E., a similar philosophy was transforming Eastern thinking through the teachings of Nagarjuna (Wilber 1995, 639). For the purposes of this paper we use the term *perennial wisdom tradition* to refer to the integral core of these great nondual philosophies, which emerged through the teachings of Plato/Plotinus in the West and Nagarjuna in the East. This core philosophy can be expressed as a dynamic balance between two complementary expressions of Spirit: the “descent” of the One into the world of the many (manifestation/immanence), and the “ascent” from the many to the One (remembrance/transcendence).

The descent has been described by Huxley (1993): “The phenomenal world of matter and of individual consciousness—the world of things and animals and men and even gods—is the manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be nonexistent.” As Lovejoy puts it, “a timeless and incorporeal One became the ground as well as the dynamic source of the existence of a temporal and material and extremely multiple and variegated universe” ([1936] 1964, 49). In this view, the phenomenal world emerges continually from a single source, an Absolute, which is variously referred to as Godhead, Brahman, Allah, Tao, Buddha Nature, Original Mind, or Emptiness (Sunyata). Hence, all matter, all beings, all of the universe is an incarnation/reflection/child of this one consciousness, this one ocean of being, in diverse forms and aggregates. This is the Descending path, the path of creation spirituality, of “horizontal transcendence” (Goodenough 2001), the exuberant embrace of the phenomenal world as a manifestation of the divine plenitude. In Wilber’s words, this path “is a *descent* of the One into the world of the Many, a movement which actually creates the world of the Many, blesses the Many, and confers Goodness on *all* of it: Spirit *immanent* in the world” (Wilber 1995, 320). Not only did the eternal One produce all the forms of the cosmos, but in so doing it manifested properties of its own nature which add to its glory. The existence of the world of phenomena was the very consummation of the perfection of the One (Lovejoy [1936] 1964, 53).

The ascent has been described by Huxley (1993): “Human beings are capable not merely of knowing about the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning. This immediate knowledge unites the knower with that which is known.” This is the Ascending path, which finds release from the suffering and turmoil of the temporal world in contemplative absorption in the eternal One. It is alignment with the one being that constitutes the

process of awakening, which is variously referred to as enlightenment, liberation, salvation, or spiritual evolution. In Wilber's words, this path is the "movement of return or *ascent* from the Many to the One, a process of remembering or recollecting the Good: Spirit *transcendent* to the world" (Wilber 1995, 320). As Lovejoy puts it, this "Divine Ground" (Plato's "Good") is "the universal object of desire, that which draws all souls toward itself; and the chief good for man even in this life is nothing but the contemplation of this absolute or essential Good" ([1936] 1964, 45).

In the perennial wisdom tradition, the ascending and descending paths are united in the Divine Ground. In the great circle of life, contemplation of the transcendent One (the Ascending path) develops the spiritual faculties that enable the realization of the immanence of the One in all the actual entities of the cosmos (the Descending path). The way up is the way down: vertical transcendence (as a path of spiritual awakening, not a metaphysical system) begets horizontal transcendence (i.e., the realization of the fundamental sacredness of the cosmos). As we recognize God in ourselves we are able to recognize God in the phenomenal world. In the words of Wilber, the One "is not just Summit (omega) and not just Source (alpha), but it is Suchness—The timeless and ever-present Ground which is equally and fully present in and as every single being, high or low, ascending or descending, effluxing or refluxing" (1995, 347).

The Ascending Path: Awakening and Spiritual Practice. The Ascending path is the path of vertical transcendence (Goodenough 2001), the path of spiritual awakening that culminates in union with God—the mystical experience of unity. The process of spiritual awakening generally requires an ardent and sincere devotion to the spiritual path that involves various spiritual disciplines. The outer aspect of spiritual discipline entails the cultivation of virtue in thought and action through the practice of generosity, kindness, truthfulness, and loving service. The outer practice is balanced and sustained by the inner practices—meditation, yoga, contemplative prayer, "Jesus prayer," sacraments—which allow the practitioner to "touch the divine, the exquisite emptiness, or the mystery and learn to bring that into one's life" (Kornfeld 1984).

Meditation/contemplation is the process of releasing and deconstructing the illusory identifications that keep us attached to our false sense of self, the mental habits of ego-centered identification that separate us from the wellspring of our being. Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (1999) remarks, "meditation consists in conducting consciousness beyond the point where it is the consciousness of a finite body or a finite mind, transferring the focus from level to level without losing its continuity or form." This process of ever-widening identification progressively encompasses an increasingly profound expanse of the cosmos. Contemplatives emphasize that this shift is not simply conceptual—it is grounded in direct, unmediated perception.

In the words of Thomas Keating,³ “the inner dynamism of contemplative prayer leads naturally to the transformation of your whole personality. Its purpose is not limited to your moral improvement. It brings about a change in your way of perceiving and responding to reality. This process involves a structural change of consciousness” (1999, 94–95). The Sufis assert that transformation of consciousness is accompanied by a “shift in perspective from the personal point of view to the Divine point of view,” which Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (1999) calls “thinking like the Universe”: We are “a continuum of consciousness ranging from the boundless, transpersonal dimension that is coextensive with all others to the ‘discrete entity’ that makes up our unique individuality.”

Most humans spend their lives trapped in their personal vantage point, or “false self” (Keating 1999). Gautama Buddha described in detail the mental processes by which we construct the personal *I* concept, our ego-based sense of personal identity (Forman 1999, 81–92). Buddha taught that our illusory identifications with our individuality, our personality, or our thoughts, which are simply transient events within the field of (eternal) consciousness, are the root of the ignorance that holds us in bondage. Buddha instructs his followers, once cleansed of all identifications, to “Take refuge in the Self,”⁴ referring to the Atman of the Hindu Upanishads: the immortal, beatific inner Self that is one and the same in all beings. Buddha also echoes the Hindu teaching that Atman, fully unveiled, is none other than Brahman, the Source of all existence⁵ (Coomaraswamy 1943). The Christian expression of this teaching is voiced by Thomas Keating: “Our basic core of goodness is our true Self. Its center of gravity is God. . . . God and our true Self are not separate. Though we are not God, God and our true Self are the same thing” (Keating 1999).

According to contemplatives, the unmediated consciousness that is developed in the meditation process can deepen into a perception of “that which transpires behind that which appears.” It opens up the spiritual senses, the “eye of the Spirit,” enabling the perception of realities that are hidden from the “eye of the flesh” (Wilber 1983). The Hindu mystic and philosopher Sri Aurobindo (1983) explains:

The one means that we have available in our mentality (for attaining to universal truth) is an extension of that form of knowledge by identity which gives us the awareness of our own existence (i.e. the self-awareness upon which the knowledge of the contents of the self is based). If then we can extend our faculty of mental self-awareness to awareness of the Self beyond and outside us (Atman or Brahman of the Upanishads) we may become possessors in experience of the truths which form the contents of the Atman or Brahman in the universe.

In the Gospel of Thomas (Saying 17), Jesus says, “I will give you what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand has touched, and what has never occurred to the human mind.” The Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi explains that “the eye of sense-perception is limited like the palm of the

hand: it has no capacity to encompass the entirety. . . . To the extent that we are able to receive unveiled light we may behold with the eye of the vast Ocean of Reality that which is now hidden from the eye of phenomena” (Nicholson 1926).

The Descending Path: An Awakened View of the Cosmos. As the spiritual faculties awaken, the contemplative begins to become aware of “the eternal splendor of the One shining through the material phenomena.”⁶ The seeker begins to experience a numinous presence underlying, unfolding, and shining through the forms of the cosmos. Physicist and Nobel laureate Erwin Schrödinger (1967) illustrates this vision by quoting the Sufi mystic Aziz Nasafi: “The spiritual world is one single spirit who stands like unto a light behind the bodily world and who, when any single creature comes into being, shines through it like a window. According to the kind or size of the window less or more light enters the world. The light itself however remains unchanged.” This light⁷ that shines through us is the “Soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which each part and particle is equally related” (Emerson 1969, 95).

Characteristic attributes of this state of awakened consciousness are wonder and “bewilderment.” In a stage of contemplative prayer that he calls “Pure Prayer,” Egyptian mystic Evagrius says, “Prayer ceases, and one becomes astonished, is caught up in wonder at the Light of God. . . . The person who has entered the Place of the Mysteries remains in wonder at them, and this is the true prayer which opens the Door to the Treasures of God” (Ponticus 1980). Contemplation of nature facilitates the emergence of this wonder. Pope John Paul II says, “Driven by the desire to discover the ultimate truth of existence, human beings seek to acquire those universal elements of knowledge that enable them to advance in their own self realization. These fundamental elements of knowledge spring from the wonder awakened in them by contemplation of creation.”⁸

Werner Heisenberg, in his essay “Science and the Beautiful” (1974), discusses the role of this experience of wonder in scientific creativity, referring to Plotinus’s definition of beauty as “the eternal splendor of the One shining through the material phenomena.” A similar viewpoint is found in the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church (1994, v. 341, 339): “The beauty of creation reflects the infinite beauty of the Creator. Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection. Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness.” To quote the Qur’an (2, 115) “Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God.” Hazrat Inayat Khan (1999), who is responsible for introducing Sufism to the West, explained that “there is no greater scripture than Nature, for Nature is Life itself. Nature in its different aspects is the materialization of that light which is called the divine Spirit.”

Sri Aurobindo (1983) explains that as our spiritual faculties awaken, Matter reveals itself to the realizing thought and to the subtilised senses as the figure and body of Spirit, Spirit in its self-formative extension. Spirit reveals itself through the same consenting agents as the soul, the truth, the essence of Matter. Both admit and confess each as divine, real, and essentially one. Mind and life are disclosed in that illumination as at once figures and instruments of the Supreme Conscious Being by which It extends and houses Itself in material form and in that form unveils Itself to Its multiple centers of consciousness. Mind attains its self-fulfillment when it becomes a pure mirror of the Truth of Being which expresses itself in the symbols of the universe; Life, when it consciously lends its energies to the perfect self-figuration of the Divine in ever-new forms and activities of the universal existence.

Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan illustrates these ideas with an example: Imagine that we are moved by the beauty of a tree. The physical eye takes in its physical form. "While the beauty of this tree depends upon its physical form, still, it has an essential reality of its own which is its meaningfulness" (1999, 29). The knowing of the mind says "this tree is beautiful." The knowing of the soul says "how wonderful to see the divine beauty manifesting through this tree." The eye of the soul is able to let go of the physical form while maintaining consciousness of the beauty that manifested through the form, because this beauty is an attribute of the Source of all, the wellspring in the depth of our being. Nature is viewed as a focus for the divine manifestation, as the medium par excellence through which that uncreated beauty reveals itself and exercises creative activity.

BEYOND FRAGMENTATION: INTEGRATION AND RENEWAL

The integration of the Ascending and Descending paths, which is grounded in contemplative insight, proved impossible to maintain as the perennial wisdom tradition was filtered through the various religious systems of the West, which tended to shift the emphasis from spiritual practice and direct experience to faith and dogma. "There was no way in which the flight from the Many to the One, the quest of a perfection defined wholly in terms of contrast with the created world, could be effectively harmonized with the imitation of a Goodness that delights in diversity and manifests itself in the emanation of the Many out of the One" (Lovejoy [1936] 1964, 84). Out of this fracture emerged the Sensate and Ideational worldviews.

Uniting the Fractured Paths. The Ideational worldview of Sorokin (1941; 1957) can be identified as the fractured Ascending path (divorced from the Descending path), which produces an otherworldly religion that seeks release from the suffering and turmoil of the temporal world in a spiritual realm beyond time and space. Without the Descending Path, which enables the seeker to see his or her goal reflected in all the forms of the cosmos, it results in an attempt to rise above this world as the abode of

evil and temptation. It is the path of asceticism and world denial, which requires withdrawal from the senses, from the body, from the earth, and from the physical passions.

The Sensate worldview of Sorokin can be identified as the fractured Descending path (divorced from the Ascending path), which results in a this-worldly religion, summoning men and women to embrace the goodness of the phenomenal world in all its diversity of forms. Without the Ascending path—which enables the realization of the Divine Ground within which all phenomena have their being—it leads to a horizontal embrace of the most superficial aspect of phenomena, ignoring the depth of divinity inherent in each form. It denies the possibility of absolute truth, beauty, or ethics. It is the path of materialism, relativism, and positivism, which tends to degenerate into hedonism and nihilism.

In light of this analysis, we can view Sorokin's Idealistic worldview—which represents the harmonious blending of the Sensate and Ideational, the Ascending and the Descending—as an expression of the perennial wisdom. We can view the history of Western culture as a fluctuation between the two poles of the perennial wisdom tradition: a transcendent Good divorced from the world, and an immanent goodness stripped of its divinity. Sorokin has asserted that the Idealistic phase, which may arise during the transition between Sensate and Ideational phases, represents the most profound blossoming of human culture in the harmonious balance of opposites—inner and outer, material and spiritual, relative and absolute. He has demonstrated that the current world crisis displays all the symptoms of a cultural transition from Sensate to Ideational phases. We may therefore anticipate the emergence of an Idealistic subculture, and, as expected, signs of this emergence can be found in many current trends in Western culture (Harman 1998; Capra 1982). These signs include the waning influence of scientific materialism in modern science, the revival of the perennial wisdom tradition in philosophy and theology, and the renewal of interest in the contemplation dimension of the world religions in mainstream society.

Reenchantment and Ecological Awareness. This cultural transition can be viewed as an answer to the cry of humanity in the face of the global crisis. It represents the healing and rebalancing of our fragmented worldview by restoring the balance between the Ascending and Descending paths—between the inner and outer, the spiritual and material, the mystical and the scientific. The healing of the (Sensate) cultural deterioration into extreme relativism, hedonism, and nihilism, which Western culture has cycled through several times within recorded history (Sorokin 1941), occurs in the completion of the cultural cycle, that is, the reemergence of the complementary phase with the restoration of balance. Extreme nihilism, relativism, and hedonism are healed by the profound meaningfulness that emerges from the experience of the Divine Ground of existence. The

reenchantment of the world requires a revival of the Ascending path of God realization, not as an abstract speculation but as a living Reality—a direct transforming experience of Divinity.

In this awakened state, all of nature is viewed as sacred, as an expression or reflection of the splendor of the One. This realization, which can provide an experiential grounding for “horizontal transcendence” (Goodenough 2001), transforms one’s relation to the rest of the cosmos. Indeed, in light of the perennial wisdom tradition, our perception of connectedness, of our integral place in the web of life, emerges as an attribute of our connection with the eternal, beatific Source of all existence. It is rooted in a direct, unmediated vision of the cosmos that transcends our culture, our concepts and opinions, and our conditioning.

True compassion is born when we realize that the same divine light that shines through own being also shines through all other sentient beings.⁹ If we realize that all sentient beings are expression of one true Self, one universal Soul, then all beings will naturally be treated as one’s own self. Loving one’s neighbor as one’s self no longer requires a moral imperative, it “comes as easily and naturally as the rising of the sun or the shining of the moon” (Wilber 1995, 291). The perennial wisdom summons us to the realization and expression of a universal compassion that transcends and outshines all previous egocentric, sociocentric, or anthropocentric forms. This is the “profound fruition of the decentering thrust of evolution—a compassion which breathes the common air and beats the common blood of a Heart and Body that is one in all beings . . . universal compassion through universal identity with the commonwealth of all beings: that I would see in an Other my own Self” (Wilber 1995, 291).

CONCLUSION

Healing the fragmentation and alienation that is at the root of the current world crises requires an integrated epistemology that embraces both the rational knowledge of scientific empiricism and the inner knowledge of spiritual experience. This integrated epistemology is fostering the emergence of an integral worldview that is consistent with modern science and rooted in the perennial wisdom of the world’s spiritual traditions. This emergent ecological vision heals and rebalances our fragmented worldview by restoring the balance between the Ascending and Descending paths—between the inner and the outer, the spiritual and the material, the mystical and the scientific. This vision transcends the illusion of separateness to discern the unity, the unbroken wholeness, that underlies the diverse forms of the universe. Our perception of connectedness, of our integral place in the web of life, emerges as an attribute of our connection with the eternal, beatific source of all existence. The perennial wisdom widens our “circle of understanding and compassion, to embrace all living creatures in the whole

of nature” (Einstein, quoted in Goldstein [1976] 1987). Our behavior, as it emerges naturally out of our perception of the sacredness of the natural world, will naturally embody love and respect for all life forms. This awakened insight promotes the healing of our long-standing alienation from the natural world and offers hope for renewal in the midst of widespread cultural deterioration. Spiritual awakening may be the post-postmodern Enlightenment that elevates humanity above the nihilism of postmodern materialism into a renewed understanding of the purpose and meaningfulness of life. This understanding emerges from the wonder evoked by an awareness of the profound splendor of the cosmic unfolding.

NOTES

1. As physicist Sir Arthur Eddington (1929) explains, “it is by looking into our own nature that we first discover the failure of the physical universe to be co-extensive with our experience of reality. In our own nature, or through the contact of our consciousness with a nature transcending ours, there are other things which claim the same kind of recognition—a sense of beauty, of morality, and finally, the root of all spiritual religion, an experience which we describe as the presence of God. It is the essence of religion that it presents this side of experience as a matter of everyday life. To live in it, we have to grasp it in the form of familiar recognition and not as a series of abstract scientific statements.”

2. A number of philosophers (Huxley 1945; Smith 1976; Schuon 1975; Otto 1960) have argued that a transcultural “Perennial Philosophy” can be grounded in this experiential base. In formulating this universal wisdom they have attempted to integrate the cumulative contemplative vision of countless individuals from many cultures and eras. Physicist and Nobel laureate Erwin Schrödinger, in his groundbreaking and highly influential book *What is Life?* (1967), observes that “ten years ago, Aldous Huxley published a precious volume which he called *The Perennial Philosophy*, and which is an anthology from the mystics of the most various periods and the most various peoples. Open it and you will find many beautiful utterances. . . . You are struck by the miraculous agreement between humans of different race, different religion, knowing nothing about each other’s existence, separated by centuries and millennia, and by the greatest distances that there are on our globe.” Unfortunately, the term *perennial philosophy* is misleading and has led to much misunderstanding and criticism of this viewpoint. Philosophers and theologians have objected that any universal philosophy cannot possibly do justice to the rich diversity of religious traditions and are critical of perceived attempts to establish a “watered-down global religion” (Barbour 1990; Forman 1990). In an attempt to clear up the confusion surrounding the term he popularized, Huxley (1993) explains that the Perennial Philosophy, in its purest form, cannot be expressed in words: “It is only in the act of contemplation, when words and even personality are transcended, that the pure state of the Perennial Philosophy can actually be known.” Thus arises the confusion: the “pure” Perennial Philosophy is not a philosophy in any common sense of the word. Willis Harman (1998) advocates the more appropriate term “perennial wisdom.” This wisdom transcends the categories of thought and is too profound to be captured by any single philosophical system—hence it is compatible with a diversity of expressions.

3. Thomas Keating, a Cistercian abbot who was commissioned by Pope John Paul II to facilitate the revival of the Christian contemplative tradition, is the founder of the Contemplative Outreach organization.

4. Ananda Coomaraswamy’s translation of the Buddhist scripture *Samjutta Nikaya* III.143 (Coomaraswamy 1943).

5. Coomaraswamy’s translation of the Buddhist scripture *Samjutta Nikaya* III.83,84 (Coomaraswamy 1943).

6. These are the words of Plotinus as quoted by Werner Heisenberg (1974).

7. Emerson explains that this “light” is none other than the observer or witness within each of us: “All goes to show that the soul in man is not a faculty, but a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they

lie,—an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed. From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we [false self] are nothing, but the light [true Self] is everything” (Emerson, 1969, 96).

8. From the encyclical “Fides et Ratio,” available at <http://www.vatican.va>.

9. Schopenhauer has explained that the essence of compassion is the act of seeing oneself in another, and that this compassion is the metaphysical ground of ethics: “For if plurality and distinction belong only to this world of appearances, and if one and the same Being is what is beheld in all these living things, well then, the experience that dissolves the distinction between the I and the Not-I cannot be false. On the contrary: its opposite must be false. The former experience underlies the mystery of compassion, and stands, in fact, for the reality of which compassion is the prime expression. That experience, therefore, must be the metaphysical ground of ethics and consist simply in this: that one individual should recognize in another, himself in his own true being” (Schopenhauer 1969, quoted in Wilber 1995, 290).

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