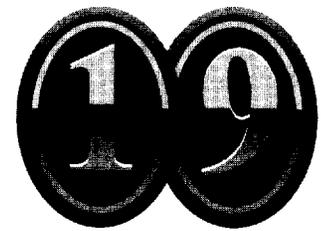




NELSON KELLOGG:

Wisdom Communities



### The Crisis in Ourselves, in Our Culture

**W**e are living out a crisis, you and I. The crisis I am speaking of is not that of the depredation of the planet, or the exploitation of entire peoples. The crisis is one of meaning and purpose, both individually and collectively. We need to be able to produce satisfying answers to such questions as: "What constitutes a good life?"; "What is the narrative of my own life?"; "How do I understand my linkage and responsibility to other human beings?" and, "Is there any meaning to be found in the succession of human generations on this planet?" If we cannot address such questions straightforwardly, without a smirk of irony, then what *does* it matter that we do anything in life beyond the immediate and the selfish?

For us living in First World, postmodern societies, the problem of meaning and purpose is particularly acute, and a lack of resolution can lead to apathy and eventual paralysis, preventing us from taking passionate action to relieve the other problems we must face. This is a most dire consequence, since it is we who also control the most resources that could be brought to bear on the grave economic and humanitarian injustices we currently tolerate, as well as the ecological injuries which are unsustainable. We need to become engaged in the world beyond self, but if we continue to avoid all questions of meaning as if they were antiquarian artifacts that have lost their relevance in our sophisticated culture, our efforts in these other realms of action will be half-hearted and short-lived.

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The human experiment is in far too great a flux for static dogmas to supply its solutions. Wisdom is dynamic and multi-vocal. As the French playwright Andre Gide, wrote, "We must believe those who say they are seeking the truth, and doubt those who say they have found it." The crux of the postmodern dilemma was already detected, a half-century ago, by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, and was discussed in a remarkably insightful address called a "Discourse on Thinking." Heidegger saw the problem as nothing less than a battle for the human soul. More specifically it is a battle for the awareness and conscious atten-

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the production of material advantage for the calculating individual. Calculative thinking appends no larger meaning to its business than the immediate, and therefore makes little attempt at assigning value to thoughts and actions beyond the obvious monetary ones. Calculative thinking is that which, to an ever-increasing degree, earns us our livings.

Meditative thinking, by contrast, is patient with itself. It seeks deeper understanding, instead of material gain, as its reward. Meditative thinking occurs when the individual is sufficiently protected from that which is merely fad, merely random transience and superficiality. It is the well-spring of truly original insight as opposed to a simple rearranging of what is. It is the repose from which the individual can learn to embrace other beings distinct from one's self. Martin Heidegger's fear, already in 1955, was that the so-called modern societies ("postmodern" had yet to be invented as a term) were engaged in a "flight from thinking," meaning an overabundance of the calculative at the cost of the meditative.

## An Example of Cultural Meaninglessness in Higher Education

To look with any sobriety at contemporary American society reveals that Heidegger's toxic revolution is nearly complete. In most sectors of higher education — the very center, one would hope, of meditative thinking — we instead see a flight from meditative thinking. "How is this course relevant to my major?" is a common refrain among undergraduates. Their parents push them to fix on their major as soon as possible and get a high-paying job in this sink-or-swim culture. Universities themselves aid and abet the very problem they sometimes bemoan.

If a young undergraduate were unfortunate enough to ask a real question of meaning (such as "What should I get from all this education?") of some professor in her major whom she admires, she would get either a calculative answer ("to get a respectable career..."), or be shunted off to either the philosophy department or to psychological counseling. The rise of professional career specialties and subspecialties during the last century was simply a mirror image of academic specialization. Even faculty within the same department don't know what the others are doing. Conversation within disciplines connects small numbers of academics from widely disparate locations, and is rule-bound to consider only minor changes to the disciplinary dogma.

The very composition of campuses is likewise bizarre. A single campus may be the site for (beyond all the standard teaching departments) a huge variety of professional graduate schools, each providing its own certifications, a music conservatory, a narrowly-defined medical research lab, an economics think tank, and on and on. No thought or expectation is given to why these far-flung enterprises should be located on the same piece of ground, or, once in place, how they might converse with each other for the synthesis of greater, holistic understanding. To an overwhelming degree, there is no synthesis because there is no conversation. Conversation, except among one's closest peers, is seen as a distraction, as is teaching itself in a research institution. Why would a youngster go to such an institution to find answers to life's perennial questions? The answer, increasingly, is that they don't. They go instead to get trained, and to get a "leg up."

## Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom

There are three categories of *knowing* that elucidate Heidegger's two categories of *thought*: 1. Information; 2. Knowledge, and; 3. Wisdom. Information may simply be data, or it may be data arranged to answer a specific question. Knowledge is more systematic, aggregating information across certain webs of questions, which we often define as disciplines. Wisdom is of a radically different nature. Wisdom, like meditative thinking, does not shun questions of meaning categorically, but embraces them. It uses conversations among knowledge systems to aid in answering questions of meaning. And it goes even further. It incorporates the insights provided by knowledge systems through the high art of empathy.

In the modern world of objective knowledge we have presumed that we could hold the world at arm's length, test it and observe it, and find solutions unsullied by such unreliable informants as aesthetics and emotions. No one denies the power of the purely empirical approach in limit-

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What we are—and are to be—as human beings is inextricably tied to that which occupies our thoughts.  
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ed areas and to limited degrees. However, wisdom, with its attendant empathy, can change our stance toward life in ways both qualitatively and quantitatively different from knowledge alone.

We can, for instance, calculate the progression of AIDS on the African continent, factoring in every possible knowledge system (e.g., agriculture, climatology and famine cycles, trade policies, social structures, and cultural values) beyond the etiology of the disease itself. However, the very same systematized information will yield radically different responses depending upon whether we consider the results of our investigations through the high art of empathy, or simply as applied knowledge of the most calculative sort. In the second path our choice of collective action may well be to do the least intervention possible that will at the same time isolate our own economy from the most dire ramifications. In the first path, we may choose a much greater involvement simply because we wish to reduce human suffering.

## Stories, Meaning, Wisdom, and Community

We, in the United States, rightly congratulate ourselves for being the most ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse society in history. But our manifold pluralities may prove to be both our ultimate salvation, and also

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hearing stories is only surpassed by their desire to tell them. While each has drifted into a motif of choice (without any promptings from their parents: "princesses" and "dinosaurs"), they eagerly launch, with great enthusiasm, into a game of "pretend" that can last a very long time. To be sure, the plotlines do not include much allusion, symbol, or metaphor. In the case of dinosaur stories, they (the dinosaurs) come in two basic varieties (good and bad), and much of the story simply involves naming all the characters to be involved on both sides of the equation, after which they all duke it out. But that is as it should be. With more biological and psychological growth, as well as simply more life experience behind them, these children will likely develop a taste for more complex and multifaceted stories. This is why our most timeless stories are often found in the

world's ancient religions, where stories must accommodate an audience at many different levels.

However, McAdams goes further than reclaiming the place of storytelling in humanity's persistent attempt to understand the world in which it finds itself. He writes: "We are tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. This is not the stuff of delusion or self-deception. We are not telling ourselves lies. Rather, through our personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life. In order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves. Enduring human truths still reside primarily in myth, as they have done for centuries." In other words, stories can impart not just codes of conduct but essential meaning, both for the individual and for the larger community.

But what are we to do in a society that has myths from many different cultural traditions, and where plurality is often a code word for merely tolerating the other ("Live and let live—then leave me alone"), not for embracing the other as a gift? What are we to do in a society that has indoctrinated itself in the lie that material surrogates for meaning and purpose are all one needs to know about meaning and purpose? What are we to do in a society that so believes in empiricism as the only path of knowing that it has reduced the value of myth to be synonymous with blatant fabrication? What are we to do in a society with so many storied traditions present, but which can't see the forest of meaning for its fixation on a single, objective truth? What are we to do in a society saturated with news on a twenty-four-hour cycle, but with no coherence among the flashing images and reports?

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Empiricism in its many forms has deprived us the possibility of a spiritual foundation in our search for meaning. Our science-based technologies have developed attractive surrogates—in the form of electronic communications—that keep us company and keep us distracted. Our lives are so dominated by technologies of distraction that we can easily live for long periods without pondering a single question of meaning. They not only fill up our time, but they feed off our innate need for community.

Yet blaming our abandonment of meaning on science does far more harm than good. The sum total of scientific discoveries from the past four centuries is magnificent, and is undeniably one of the greatest accomplishments of the human intellect. We would do well to allow ourselves

joy in the contemplation of scientific leaps of imagination, just as we afford ourselves joy in the majesty of timeless art, or of nature herself.

As we reassert the magic of stories in our lives, we cannot simply appropriate mythologies from other wisdom traditions at face value, just because they worked well for the original authors and audiences of those stories. We can embrace stories from other cultures and other times for the wisdoms they express, but we can't, by force of will, believe plot elements that may have been very believable in the original time and place of their telling. The underlying truths may remain as valid as they ever were, but we cannot coerce ourselves or others into believing narratives that are no longer believable. We cannot reject what we have learned to be true, without doing harm to ourselves.

What stories will serve us in providing ultimate meaning and purpose in our lives? Here postmodern society is in a place it has never been before. Even durable life stories can only work at all levels so long as the underlying context for how one composes that life remains reasonably constant. Suppose that a person has lived to middle age, for example, as a farmer with certain expectations for self and family and continuity.

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Suddenly, through some twist of events, that individual finds himself selling the farm, and, at a local junior college, retraining for a job in the information technology industry! That person's life story, at very many levels, must change for him to make sense of what he is doing.

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We have seen something similar happening at intervals for entire cultures, but usually these intervals are widely spaced, coinciding with huge culture-wide shifts. These are the demarcations left by the great revolutions, including the agricultural revolution, the scientific revolution, the industrial revolution, the Darwinian revolution, or others that changed the answers to the big questions. These questions, including how the world came into being, how we as humans came about, what elements constitute a life well-lived, and what one might expect to happen as one aged, all these and others, once answered by likely and compelling stories for a particular time and place, could be expected to remain stable for many generations. However, sometime during the last century our workable mythologies diminished to the point where they could not retain their validity for even a generation. We now find ourselves with several options. We can reinvent our mythologies on a nearly continual basis; we can step back from exact particulars in our explanatory mythologies and compose more fluid and evocative stories; we can retreat into any one of many dogmatisms; or we can simply allow the lives we lead to become disconnected from and narratives of meaning and purpose, relying upon

such relative metrics as the size of our bank accounts to tell us what is important and how we are doing. Unfortunately, the last two "solutions" seem to be the ones the societies of the globe are choosing.

There is one great prerequisite for us, as a species, to embody hope rather than despair. The adults in our society must unshackle the rising generations from the dead weight of monotonic calculative thinking, and the materialistic lifestyle of competition and isolation that pure calculative thinking supports. This idiotic presumption that human life is a zero-sum game, where everything that "counts" can be counted and that what you have comes only at my expense, is lethal to the encouragement of species-optimism, and it is a crime against humanity to force such a worldview upon our young. This is a dull and life-depriving narrative to live by, and we simply must do better if we are to survive as more than brute beasts. Every semester, at the university where I teach, I am shocked by the numbers of young people who have resigned themselves to the materialistic credo.

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This unshackling must take place at every juncture of opportunity. Everyone who has either contact with or responsibility for the younger generations, whether as parents, teachers or mentors of any stripe, or simply members of the same communities, must provide better narratives for living than our consumerist culture insists upon.

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One of the most elegant ways to foster generative narratives for living is through developing the elegant art of conversation. True conversation produces wisdoms unknown to us prior to embarking upon the conversation. Like wisdom itself, conversation is not dogmatic. It is accepting and patient and multi-vocal. I count myself as extremely fortunate in that my regular working life involves teaching young adults, and almost without exception I have been able to do this in the seminar format. This is where a number of individuals (usually thirteen to fifteen) sit around a table and hold directed conversations on a particular topic and set of readings. One of the most frequent responses from students is that this is the first time they were actually encouraged to share their own thoughts and opinions on anything. I wonder how many adults would respond similarly in the same situation.

We need the sorts of conversations, in all of our overlapping communities, that generate continually evolving narratives relevant to our lives. We can begin by constructing our own stories and telling them to people we are close to. We can listen attentively to the stories of others. There are few things the human psyche and soul crave more than to truly be heard by another in an accepting way. We must take care that we don't stifle the humanistic sharing of wisdom in a misguided attempt to avoid, for exam-

ple, conflating church and state. We value our cultural plurality. But if we force the sharing of those pluralities to stop abruptly at the point where the narrative departs from a superficial telling of facts to a sharing of the depth of how that tradition or that mythology *feels*, we have done nothing to impart the depth of the other's experience. Finally, we must hold our colleges and universities to account more for how they inspire wisdom and less for how they distribute facts and techniques. Anyone applying for a job in the teaching professions ought to be able to answer the undergraduate who asks what she should be getting from "all this education." A prospective faculty member should have given this *substantial* thought, even if the post is to teach a very narrow range of discipline-based courses.

That undergraduate's question ought to be part of a hiring interview.

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Where will all these conversations lead? Who knows? There are as many conceptions of the endpoint of truth stories as there are humans to think about them. The notions for constructing these conversations within wisdom communities range from a tradition of handed-down story in oral transmission communities, to the rigid and doctrinaire interpretations of text-bound religions, to the intellectual approach of sampling from a "great books" bibliography, to the notion that the only constant is change, to the jaundiced view that nothing matters. And those who give time to meditative thinking concerning their own mythologies will probably find themselves making a journey through more than one of the truth stories by the time they reach middle age. The only truth story modality that I am confident is bankrupt is the declaration that nothing matters.

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Perhaps we will find our durable wisdoms of the future in the same way that the Sufi poet Rumi did, who wrote:

I have lived on the lip  
 of insanity, wanting to know reasons,  
 knocking on a door. It opens.  
 I've been knocking from the inside!

In any case, the sharing of wisdom stories, however limited or quotidian they may sound, as we construct our own life stories, is essential, no matter what stage of life we inhabit. Perhaps the great story of our times will be that we sought out truths and wisdoms. And while doing this, even flailing around in the dark at times, we gave ourselves the meaning and purpose that come with that striving, and this gave us the hope and optimism to tackle all the other problems that threatened to bring an abrupt close to the human experiment. That would be wonderful.