

From Knowledge to Wisdom



Julio Olalla

In my research and in my work at the Newfield Network, I have arrived at the conclusion that contemporary learning and the traditional view of leading are not responding to the demands of our times; that what and how we are learning, as individuals and as organizations, is part of the problem, not the solution. I believe that the present and restrictive view that our culture has of learning is having devastating consequences on our ability to lead with wisdom.

The same way we, as Western Culture, believe that more material possessions will make us happy, we believe that more information will bring us wisdom. Confusing having information with knowing has left out the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of knowing, plus the intuitive and spiritual aspects of our connection with the world. We have developed our learning and leading practices as a frantic pursuit of more...more information, more profit, more etc., and are relating with the world as if all we can do is explain it in order to use it, in a gruesomely utilitarian fashion.

I believe that our philosophy of learning and our leading practices must include *and* transcend our concern for conceptual knowledge and effective action; they must also be able to illuminate the paths toward wisdom and effective living.

In the transformational change work I and the Newfield Network do with individuals and organizations, we claim that the kind of individual and collective 'observer' we are defining, to an important degree, how we go about leading and taking action. Different individuals, different organizations, different cultures bring forth a different world and act in different ways.

Transformational leading, the aim of our work at Newfield, is a shift in our coherence that allows the emergence of a new observer, one who is able to embrace the mystery of life, aware of the power and limits of conceptual learning, and capable of foreseeing new actions and producing unprecedented results, while caring equally for personal and collective concerns. This is our definition of what it is to lead others with wisdom.

What has been revealed to me in the 30 years of work is the significant historical and cultural traditions of thinking that have not only shaped our present commonsense epistemology, but that have also had a powerful hold on our current approaches to learning and education, producing devastating consequences. Let me give you some examples of what I'm speaking of.

Richard Dawkins, a prestigious, contemporary scientist writes: "Science is the systematic method by which we apprehend what is true about the real world in which we live. If you want consolation, or an ethical guide to the good life, you can look elsewhere (and may be disappointed). But if you want to know what is true about reality, science is the only way. If there were a better way, science would embrace it."¹

In this quote, you can find one of the most relevant epistemological assumptions of our times known as *scientism*, the belief that science and its methodology is the only way to

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know what is true about reality. While this belief pervades the thinking of Western society, there are many leading figures in the field of science that have not shared this belief. While they were aware of the tremendous power of scientific thinking, they were also aware of its limits.

Another assumption we can find in Dawkins' quote is that purpose and values are a separate realm from *what we know*. What are we to make of the phrase: "If you want consolation, or an ethical guide to the good life, you can look elsewhere?" What is he telling us about the relationship between knowing and ethics? Is the implication that we can learn *about* reality, but we cannot learn *from* it?

"We exile the sacred to the heavens."

The molecular biologist Jacques Monod states that assumption very clearly when he writes: "The cornerstone of scientific method is the systematic denial that true knowledge can be got at by interpreting phenomena in terms of final causes—that is to say, of 'purpose'."²

These assumptions manifest themselves in every aspect of culture and society, from the negative environmental impact of human activity to the disenchantment of our students within the school system. They define, fundamentally, our way of being in the world.

The consequences of this thinking are devastating.

"Today we participate," writes David Abram, "almost exclusively with other humans and with human-made-technologies. It is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape. We still *need* that which is other than ourselves and our own creations. We are human only in contact, and in conviviality, with what is not human." And he adds: "Without the oxygenating breath of the forests, without the clutch of gravity and the tumbled magic of rapid rivers, we have no distance from our technologies, no way of assessing their limitations, no way to keep ourselves from turning into them."³

In other words, we have nothing to learn from, nothing to imitate, respect, or admire but ourselves. We have ended up in a self-referential learning, an arrogant way to place ourselves in the Universe. We exile the sacred to the heavens. We have arrived at what we call an epistemology of solitude.

Willis Harman writes of the impact of this thinking on the field of economics: "The industrialized world, having lost any consensus on ultimate meanings and values, steers itself mainly by economic and financial signals serving as pseudo-values."⁴ And William Greider refers to this in his own words: "'More' is the bluntest expression of how we have defined the 'pursuit of happiness.'"⁵

Consistent with that, it comes as no surprise what economist Milton Friedman, a Nobel laureate, once said: "So the question is, do corporate executives, providing they stay within the law, have responsibilities . . . other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible? And my answer is, no, they do not."⁶ So, in corporations led with only that responsibility in mind, emptiness of the soul, despair, meaninglessness, and illness are not strange outcomes.

As the Dalai Lama writes in the foreword of the book *Essential Spirituality* by Roger Walsh: "In our increasing materialistic world, we are driven by a seemingly insatiable desire for power and possessions. Yet in this vain striving, we wander ever further from inner peace and mental happiness. Despite our pleasant material surroundings, many people today experience dissatisfaction, fear, anxiety, and a sense of insecurity. There seems to be something lacking within our hearts."⁷

Knowledge has become another possession and therefore it has also become the object of greed. Wisdom, on the contrary, cannot be a possession. It cannot be traded, regulated, or registered. It cannot be owned by any individual, because it lives in a territory that is not solely human, it is shared with the gods. Wisdom is not what we know about the world, it is what the world discloses for us. If knowledge can live in greed, wisdom can only live in gratitude. If

knowledge belongs to thought, wisdom belongs to soul. If knowledge creates silos and divisions, wisdom integrates. If knowledge is knowing *about* it, wisdom is *being* it.

Wisdom has a sense of timing and relevance that is mostly hidden to knowledge. Knowledge may deny meaning, wisdom is inseparable from it. Knowledge lives in the mental domain, wisdom also lives in soul and spirit.

William Greider presents in his book *The Soul of Capitalism* another consequence of the way we hold knowing: “Think of the paradox as enormous and without precedent in history: a fabulously wealthy nation in which plentiful abundance may also impoverish our lives.” And he adds: “Our situation is unique—learning how to live amid endless plenty and, ironically, how to live well in spite of it.”⁸

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We have also seen the consequences of this commonsense epistemology in medicine. During 2002, more than 50 percent of Americans who looked for help in the area of health visited a practitioner of complementary medicine not only because of the high prices of traditional medicine, but because of the soullessness of a highly technologically-driven discipline. “The recent explosion of interest in alternative care—including such disciplines as psychoneuroimmunology—has made it quite clear that the person’s *interior states* (emotions, psychological attitude, imagery, and intentions) play a crucial role in both the *cause* and the *cure* of even physical illness.”⁹ “The level of ignorance within science about the origin, function, and destiny of human consciousness is appalling. In view of this, we are justified in boldly exploring new territory that might shed light on the nature of the human mind and its role in health.”¹⁰

The assumptions and their subsequent consequences I have referred to, along with other ones that will be discussed in these essays, have become essential parts of what I have called the ‘commonsense epistemology’ of our times. They shape the mainstream thinking that informs our formal education, economics, politics, medicine, and other important domains of our lives.

We must build a new epistemology, a new discourse on knowing and learning and put this to serve in our leading of others – whether on a local, community, regional, national or global level.

As quoted by William Keepin in his book *River of Truth: Life Work of David Bohm*, “What is needed today is a new surge that is similar to the energy generated during the Renaissance but even deeper and more extensive. The essential need is for a ‘loosening’ of rigidly held intellectual content in the tacit infrastructure of consciousness, along with a ‘melting’ of the ‘hardness of the heart’ on the side of feeling. The ‘melting’ on the emotional side could perhaps be called the beginning of genuine love, while the ‘loosening’ of thought is the beginning of awakening of creative intelligence. The two necessarily go together.”¹¹

And these two are the foundation of transformational leadership.

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