The Third Self: On Wisdom, Conflict and the Conquering Soul

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Rather than begin by responding to the question of what engaged spirituality means to me, I began this journey by observing what the question stirred in me.

• First: resistance to writing about that which I so deeply know is a living process and, as such, how could I possibly capture it in a fixed set of rambling thoughts strung together on a page?

• immediately followed by: a sense of absurdity about entertaining my thoughts and subsequent scribblings about a thing as even remotely grasping the thing itself,

• and then: a chafing feeling of self-importance that I am being asked to write about something I feel "just is" and have as little choice about, if I heed my internal compass, as which feet to put my shoes on in order that they feel alright,

• quickly engulfed by: a tangled knot of inexpressible emotions altogether fleeting and unintelligible, individual and transgenerational, ancient and beyond time: grasping—aversion—arrogance—fear—lack—pride—self-hatred and more fear. These emotions are deeply embedded, psychically and physically, in many, many layers of personal and collective years of experience: joyful, tragic and disturbingly indifferent, each subtly and imperceptibly shifting the current of my stream of consciousness,

• and finally: a relieving flash of purifying laughter showing up only as a crinkling eye and knowing, muted smile.

Two, maybe three seconds have passed that beheld lifetimes. I’ve once again been spared the protracted agony of acting out each of these emotions on myself, unwitting loved ones, assorted strangers and supposed enemies, by a deep and abiding practice of love and fierce, unwavering compassion for the apparent complexity of being human with all of its attending afflictions.

Even as I opt to navigate steadily beyond each of these doorways, leaving them unopened and unindulged, I hold in my consciousness a simultaneous awareness of the wellspring of potential for unmitigated suffering each one had in store had I defaulted to the behaviors prescribed for the role I should have played in life: that of a stumbling, aimless and sometimes blissful sheep.
As each moment arises in an ever-interdependent chain of this causing that and then that and then that, there is present a Witness that observes the unfolding drama in its entirety with formidable and humbling dispassion.

I’ve taken notice of Life’s play from the seat of the Watcher and self-liberated the wretched limitations of the part I’d been handed. I’ve been awakened to the Truth of the inherent cycle of suffering written into the scene and as simultaneous Player and Witness, I rest in the in it but not of it land of the relatively free. Still, I’m not quite satisfied.

Aloof, pervasive, ineffable and palpable, this Witness is non-interfering as is the Moon, casting light without discrimination on all that Is, just as it Is. The Witness neither beckons things to grow nor shrink, aspire nor retreat, harbor faith nor despair. As such, cultivating an awareness of the presence of the Witness is not enough, for the gift of the Witness is only Wisdom.

I question this myself: Isn’t wisdom what we want? Isn’t that our highest pursuit? We’re not speaking of plain-old knowledge. We’ve already deconstructed the Altar of Information and reduced the budget for the Department of Intelligence Acquirement. I Know lost to I Am and the votes counted this time. We might even say that East edged out West, though this is a game of non-competition. Don’t we need an array of model examples of 100% pure, certified organic Wisdom? Even locally-grown? Wisdom is the apex of our aspiration and panacea for the pain caused by our constant entertainment of millennia-old habit-patterns, able to cut through delusion in a single slice…or is it?

Perfecting Wisdom

“No eye, ear, nose tongue, body, mind; no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, thing…Overcoming all delusion, realizing Nirvana.”

— Heart of the Perfection of Great Wisdom Sutra

Alone, wisdom is cool, distant and choiceless. It simply reflects the Truth of as-it-isness with an unflinching clarity and objectivity that is sullied only when cast (as it must be) through the veil of the, small, egoic Lower I. And in a cruel and predictable backstretch towards our culture’s allegiance to rugged Individuality, Wisdom seems to lord over the realm of Spirit. There is a danger here. Observing and unobserved, Wisdom as Higher Self falls prey to passive indifference and like mega-corporations, is responsible to and invested in only itself and its own growth and manifestation. At its best: surgical, skillful and precise; and at its worst, cutting, steely and sharp.

And what about that Lower I, Ego, Small Self that we’ve been advised time and time again to avoid, let go of, surrender, even kill, should we find it in the form of a Buddha? Is there any redeemable value in it at all in the great rush towards Selflessness, No Self, Non-Self? Further and perhaps seemingly more improbable: does the
Self, with its coarseness, clinging, craving and general crankiness, have in it some seed of usefulness that can serve, indeed enhance, the High seat of wisdom?

While wisdom seems to hover high in the vast, all-encompassing realm of Spirit, what enlivens the lower, rooted, Earth-bound Self is Soul. Anything but choice-less, Soul is chocolate ice cream-loving, ideas and ideals, art as revolution, double-shot latté-having, power to the peaceful, making Love not war.

Our Soulful Selves see our own children in theirs, mothers in women, sisters in girls and lovers in 10 and 1,000 lost men of war. Our hearts are wrenched by the Soul’s communal beating that feels every death in a minute skipping of the breath. 3,000 inconceivable deaths and we gasp uncontrollably for air.

Thus it is soul’s flaming passion that takes it to heart, takes it to the street, and eventually even takes up arms. Because Soul is also needing and nurturing, family and familiar, fearful and fiery, safety and security, securing and protecting, propositioning and propagandizing, high-hand and Homeland. It is, in direct paradoxical proportion, what makes us human beings and what makes us need to practice becoming human.

Don’t be disheartened because it is exactly herein that lives the hearty seed of compassion: From the very dark, muddy, contemptible earthfulness of our frail conditioning, we are, with impassioned intention and practice, capable of ushering forth the unstained white lotus of peace and pure, Loving action. It’s no mistake that in ancient Buddhist texts, The Conqueror that practices perfect Wisdom is the Lord of Compassion. Compassion is directly cultivated from forming the habit-practice of being with Soul.

The Grace of Conflict
It is the practices of being with and bearing witness to that most avail themselves to birthing and sustaining action and activism tempered by compassion. Practices of being alone in the company of others invites the transparency needed to strengthen integrity. Bearing witness is the courageous intention to have one’s heart broken and eyes open to another’s suffering with nothing to do but be there.

The forms of these practices are at once varied and specific: community-rooted meditation and prayer; councils of the collective; exchanging self for others with others; looking steadfastly into the lovingly-held mirror of a spiritual friend’s heart/mind; vision-seeking held in a container of family & friend’s support; singing heartily, dancing wildly, breathing deeply and conflicting willingly.

This last one is often overlooked and is the source of a great deal of our confusion: we seek peace through the avoidance of conflict when it is the willingness to be in conflict gracefully that most fertilizes the field of unconditional, unlimited, unassailable Love for all involved.
"We are desperate to have the answers to every question, to always know what to do and how to respond. It is obvious that there is so much that we don’t, but what we do know is that the way it has been done is not working...You have permission to not know."
— from "Courage to Be Human” Angel Kyodo Williams

We need to believe, first and foremost, that a new world, a new Way of being is possible and that we don’t have to have a snapshot handy before we’ve lived it. That we can dream of colors and shades not yet seen. And that not only is there a place of dignity, respect and wholeness for each of us, but that it would be a nothing but a thirst-driven mirage without all of us.

We need to believe in Purpose as the director of our Power, but we also need to honor and support purposelessness: time and space for activity with neither goal nor intention other than exquisite attention to the activity itself. We have to exalt in planting seeds and bristle with excitement as the first small shoots peer above ground, but we also need to protect the sacred time of gestation, cocooning, metamorphosis that appears as not doing.

I want to articulate something about what I believe an engaged spirituality actually IS rather than what we may be witnessing as our fumbling attempts at it:

- Engaged spirituality is our very human effort to begin to minimize the desperately gnawing feeling of alienation we’ve nurtured into a disproportionate chasm with our tired strategies of herding people like cattle to divide and count(er) under the guide of organizing.

- It’s our confusing and sometimes confused attempt to rectify the discordance and mistruth that we hear in every “us vs. them” politic and persuasion.

- It’s the expansion of our hearts for that most noble effort of becoming spacious enough to allow for what is while keeping an eye towards what could be.

- It’s finding the balance between things perfect just as they are, the awareness of incalculable suffering and injustice and the bittersweet middle path that we must walk in the meantime, the between time of the reality of Now and promise of Then.

- It’s the continuous, unwavering march forward in an endless and seemingly futile battle in which, paradoxically, that futility manifests only when we deign to cease walking.

- It is the hard-won marriage of Spirit and Soul, forged in silence, that gives birth to Loving Action. A creation borne from the deep practice and learning of how to hold space with a broken heart and still show up again and again.
Authenticity & The Third Self

“Take your practiced powers and stretch them out until they span the chasm between two contradictions...For the god wants to know (her)self in you.”

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Practice that aligns our inner and outer worlds is the bridge and balance between Wisdom and Compassion, Spirit and Soul, Silence and Action, Being and Doing, Impersonal and Transpersonal. But we need more than just one-shot deal weekend Better Person boot camps. We need to locate the energetic leaks coming from the incomplete and unattended areas of personal spiritual growth so that we can harness that lost fuel into the drive towards real and sustainable social transformation.

We’ll want to do it with less of the drag of a stuck Ego Self and not much of the disinterest of a too-lofty Wisdom Self. For that we need the reflective, flexible container provided by sustained, contiguous practice within the safe and nurturing walls of a richly diversified community. It is from here that we are able to embody that elusive but infinitely generative Third Self, wise in its stillness, compassionate in its action, authentic in each moment to the next.

It is this Third, Authentic Self that I believe holds the key to our salvation. It is, by its nature, holistic, integrative, collective-minded and self-responsible. It is not manufactured outside, but called forth from within. When truly invited, the Third Self lives in service to the liberation of all, drawing from the endless energetic source of Spirit, committed to the Earth Mother and all her wounding and wounded children.

I have been both witness and guide to ceremonies, rites and practices of individuals and even organizations striving to make the re-connection to their Authentic Being Selves. They pray to find a Way so that they can act more cleanly each time they bravely face down injustice, and treat themselves more kindly when they cannot.

What I pray for is their support and even my own as we earnestly spread the pieces of this world in front of us so that we can rearrange them to fit more of us in a fulfilling way. As activists, we need and welcome support and collaboration with researchers that can help us expand our language for what we deeply know, and we can in turn provide more faces and stories for what’s been deeply thought of. We need time to re-search our own actions, and craft new, revolutionary forms while living our lives in ecologically sound ways: less isolation, more collaboration, in ongoing conversation about our hard-won discoveries with our peers and the world.

Time isn’t running out, but it is always running and if we’re to have any sustainable social transformation, sometimes we need to simply sit on the side: to catch our breath, watch our thoughts, and invite the Third Self to come home to serve.

— to all my relations. © MMIV angel Kyodo williams

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