

# Braided Way

PILOT  
ISSUE

Faces and Voices of Spiritual Practice



## What is Wisdom?

Seeking the Ancient Path of Authenticity in Modern Life

## Gratitude Photography

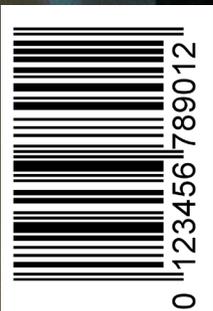
Finding Light in the Shadows

## Follow the Good Red Road

A Native American Looks at Spirituality

# A Braided Life

Carol Vaccariello's Spiritual Journey





FROM THE EDITOR

## A Vision of Unity in Diversity

Welcome to the pilot issue of *Braided Way Magazine*. In our contemporary life, we now have access to the spiritual practices of traditions that represent all cultures and stretch back in time. We are no longer limited to the religion of our parents, our culture or our communities. Since the establishment of human societies, religions have been regional, creating divisions among humanity, often with violent consequences.

To combat these divisions, the *Braided Way* offers a means to embrace the unity of diversity. The spiritual practices of our collective cultures provide the perspective and wisdom to live with sacred awareness. While many people are repelled by the dogma of religion, we yearn for spiritual practices that bring a broad awareness of the unity of spirit, energy and life.

This pilot issue showcases the possibilities of the platform we envision to inspire the spiritual journeys of individuals, while also influencing the larger cultures of our planet. I invite you to browse the stories in this issue, about people who dive to the depths in their careers, passions and art.

Contributing to *Braided Way Magazine* by your donations, subscriptions, submissions and enthusiasm will allow us to help people like you share the deep truth and cutting edge of their spiritual and artistic practices.

Our goal is to create a community of spiritual seekers, and we envision *Braided Way* retreats and workshops, in which our writers become teachers and workshop leaders. In this way, we can live the *Braided Way* together.

Peace for the journey,

Michael Olin-Hitt, editor

# Braided Way

The Faces and Voices of Spiritual Practice

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TERRY K HITT



KRISTIN WERSTLER

## A Braided Life

*Let the mysteries unfold. Carol Vaccariello follows Spirit in the most inconceivable ways. Her unique journey reflects a beautifully braided life.*

BY KRISTIN WERSTLER

The life of Reverend Dr. Carol Vaccariello has been a journey guided by Spirit, woven together to create a strong braid made up of different and sometimes surprising elements. She currently considers herself a “braided” person, who sees the validity and unique contributions of all spiritual traditions. Her journey to this braided approach of spiritual practice is a story of following her spiritual call and being open to this call in all the unanticipated ways it spoke to her heart and influenced her choices.

A woman of Italian heritage, raised in Roman Catholic churches and schools, Carol Vaccariello felt the pull to spiritual leadership in childhood. Despite the gender restrictions of the Roman Catholic church, she knew from a young age that she wanted to be a priest.

“When I was in the third grade, I was in Saint Margaret Mary’s grade school in Cleveland,” explains Carol. “We used to have missionary priests that would come in at different times of the year, usually during the church

season of Lent or Advent, and they would teach us. I remember it was a really cold day. During our recess, [the priest] came out in the playground, and there was a whole bunch of us little kids huddled around him, because he was a really nice guy. I remember looking up at him, and I said, ‘Father, someday I am going to be a priest – just like you.’” On that cold day, this is how the episode played out:

“Oh no honey,” the priest said. “You can’t do that.”

Carol replied, “Yeah, I’m going to be a priest – just like you.”

“Oh honey,” He repeated. “You can’t do that. But you can be a sister.”

In the schoolyard, as she breathed in the frosty air, Carol turned around, gritted her teeth, stomped her foot and said, ‘No, I’m going to be a priest! Just like you!’

This exchange, however brief, become a pivotal moment in Carol’s life. Another strand strengthening the braid that has guided her life’s journey.

“As young as I was, I remember feeling this energetic

sword go right through my heart, and I'll never forget it," she says. "That was the first time that I knew what I knew - I was going to be a priest. I just knew it. But I was still too young to understand how the Catholic church felt about this; I couldn't understand why this priest was telling me I couldn't. I knew I didn't really want to be a sister, but that's exactly what happened, right? I didn't know what else to do, but I knew I had to do something, so I ended up in the convent."

Carol found herself in Villa Maria, Pennsylvania, where she joined the Sisters of the Humility of Mary nicknamed the Blue Nuns because of their blue habit. It was with this group of women that Carol learned the deep prayer of the heart. While she was there, Carol lived in the Motherhouse, which is where the nuns' main body of authoritative power lives. It's where the infirm and old nuns are cared for and the new nuns get their formation; the beginning and end of their journeys start at the Motherhouse.

"It's like the mother ship," Carol elaborates. "And then there's all these little convents where nuns get assigned to do the work, but they always come home to the motherhouse."

The Motherhouse for the Blue Nuns was located on a farm, and Carol helped take care of 13,000 laying hens, taking boxes and boxes of eggs to Peterson's Poultry in New Castle, PA.

"This was a wonderful opportunity because during that time I was developing a deep spiritual bond with Earth," Carol recalls. "I remember one of the first songs I ever wrote was, 'Oh to be close to the Earth, oh to be chosen to care for the land, and care for the gifts that God's given to man. Oh to be close to the Earth.'"

Although her experience with the Blue Nuns was fulfilling in many respects, it was clear that this was not where she needed to be. There was something else beyond the reach of the Motherhouse, the convent and the Blue Nuns, that Carol was missing.

"They're a beautiful group of women. I loved being there, and I wouldn't change it, ever, because of what I learned and the depth of spirituality they anchored in me. I would never give up that opportunity. But after a few years, I knew I was in the wrong place; I just didn't know what to do. When I look back, I can see the plan of the universe. Even though I don't understand it, I knew it was sacred, and I knew in my heart that my

whole life would be about whatever that is. And that's another thing about this - you don't have to understand anything. You just have to keep moving in the direction that you're called."

Calling upon the courage to leave what was safe, what was familiar is one of the incredible feats of Carol's life.

"The Mother Superior didn't want me to go," explains Carol. "So I walked out. Talk about tough. But I had to, because when Spirit calls you to do something, you do it. I simply cannot let someone tell me how to live my life when I know for sure that Spirit's calling me to do something else."

This calling continued to guide her along the path of her life. After leaving the convent, she returned to her

In the schoolyard, as she breathed in the frosty air, Carol turned around, gritted her teeth, stomped her foot and said, 'No, I'm going to be a priest! Just like you!'

passion for sacred music and led choirs, playing organ and guitar at various churches. However, the desire to be a priest still burned inside her.

One day, she was asked to be a substitute for a church's regular musician. Carol was an experienced musician and earned her first degree in Sacred Music. Although she normally played the organ, this time she was playing the guitar. Her eyes were closed. She was singing a solo in front of the entire congregation.

"I was singing and then it got so quiet," Carol says, nearly whispering. "You could've heard a pin drop on the carpeting. And I thought, 'Is everybody still here?' So I opened my eyes and they were all there. Then my knees got shaky. As soon as I finished singing the song, I sat down because I was trembling. Then this brand new pastor, I didn't even know his name, he goes up to the podium, he looks at me and says, 'Carol...when you sing, the spirit stirs.' You see, I knew something happened in the room that day, but I didn't understand it. This had never happened before."

During the following week, Ken Hayes, the new pastor, asked Carol to come see him. When she came to his office, he asked, "What are you doing about your calling?"

"You don't know me," Carol replied. "How do you know I have a calling?"

“I know you have a calling. What are you doing about it?” Ken continued, “Our denomination ordains women. So think about it. If you want to, I’ll mentor you, and we’ll get you ordained.”

So she did.

“This is the story of my life, all of these little things that keep happening,” Carol reflects. “But they’re not little, they’re really huge. It was amazing, because it was a matter of a few months. I had to go before what they called the Commission on Ministry, which is a group of six pastors from all different churches. So when I’m in there, this crazy thing started happening. They’d ask me a question, and all of a sudden I realized I had two minds: one that was Roman Catholic, and one that was emerging Protestant. Every time they’d ask me a question, I’d hear two answers. And the commission would say, ‘What are you doing? What are you doing in your head?’”

In retrospect Carol explains, “Well, you have to understand who I was at that time. I hadn’t had a chance to integrate all of this yet, and so my Roman Catholic head comes up, and then my almost Protestant head comes up, and they struggled with each other.”

However, the Commission on the Ministry was accepting of Carol’s transition, her struggle. More than that, they were able to see that she was willing to fight through the struggle. They accepted her. In less than a year, she was ordained.

But the braid does not end here.

“I still had so much I wanted to learn,” Carol explains. “I had worked at a Methodist church as the Director of Music, and their pastor – his name was Dick Yausey – encouraged me to look into a Doctor of Ministry program in Michigan. So I went up there, and they took me right in, and I earned my Doctor of Ministry in Dreamwork as a Spiritual Practice. The reason I did that was because from the time I was quite little, I couldn’t remember my dreams. So I took a whole doctoral program in dreams, trying to get myself hooked back up with my dream world. It’s really a fascinating study because you really learn things like trance work and hypnotherapy, how to help people with their dreams, the language of dreams, and how each person has their own dream language. I learned that my job as a dream worker isn’t to be an interpreter; it’s to help each person learn their own dream language.

“I was using all these parts of myself that I didn’t really know, but now understand better. It was very hypnotic, it was very otherworldly and spirit-filled, and so I was getting to learn all that stuff even though I didn’t know why I was being called to it. This is how Spirit works – we don’t have to know everything. Spirit will make sure we know what we need to know. All we have to do is say yes. Even when you’re not ready, just say yes. Because if you don’t say yes, then the very thing you probably needed to learn, you just missed, and you might get a second go, but not always. I think part of living in Spirit is being willing to live past the edge.”

Before Carol even finished her doctorate, the school hired her to be the director of the program.

“At the school, some really important things happened. It’s where I learned about the LGBTQ community. It’s where I started taking a stand, because up until then I hadn’t been asked to, and now I had to,” Carol states.

As director, one of her responsibilities was advising nearly fifty students. Solanus, one of her students, came to Carol with a passion much like her own. He was already a medical doctor, an anesthesiologist, and a dentist, but knew there was something else he needed to be doing.

“He is a beautiful, brilliant man,” Carol smiles as she speaks of him. “He came to me and said, ‘I want to be Lutheran minister. I want to bring medicine and theology together.’ So we got to be close, and then he introduced me to his partner, Rob. Those two young men became so special to me.”

But oppression in the church constantly wedged itself into their lives. When they would go to their Lutheran church, Solanus and Rob were told they couldn’t sit next to each other. Eventually, Solanus was informed that the denomination refused to ordain him due to his sexual orientation.

“I wrote a letter to their bishop about who these young men were, and what fine young men they were, and what meaningful things they were doing with their lives,” explains Carol. “All the students in Solanus’s class signed the letter, and others from seminary were invited to sign, trying to influence the bishop.”

Though their efforts didn’t work at first, Solanus never stopped pursuing the Lutheran church. He kept pushing, always saying “yes” – to whatever they asked him to do, following the pull of the Spirit on his life.



“One day I’m sitting in my office in California, and I get this excited phone call [from Solanus],” Carol recalls. “And he tells me he is going to be ordained by the bishop at his church.”

Because Carol already knew the bishop who agreed to ordain Solanus, she contacted him. Here, the braid is continuing to grow, to strengthen.

As a spiritual teacher and retreat director for Lutheran Clergy, Carol had worked with this bishop, when he was the former bishop’s assistant. She remembered him and knew that he was doing a heroic deed by agreeing to ordain Solanus. She realized that it might cost him his career as bishop since the Lutheran Church had not agreed on ordination of LGBTQ persons. Carol contacted him and, updating him about her own consecration as bishop in the Independent Catholic tradition, asked if he would like her to come and support him during the ordination. He welcomed her offer eagerly.

The day of the ordination, “the church was packed, overflowing,” Carol describes. “I mean, these men are well loved and respected. The choir loft was for clergy, and it was overflowing. The place the people had decorated was so beautiful, it was just amazing. It was very modern and beautiful. I came in at the end, following the clergy. And I went to sit with them, but the bishop insisted, ‘No, you sit with me, and when I go up to ordain Solanus, you come and stand next to me. We’ll both lay hands on him.’ So when it was time, we both go up, we lay hands on Solanus, and we do the ordination. It was the most beautiful thing.

“Then Rob, his partner, takes the stole the women had made, and he puts it on Solanus. At the end, only as Rob and Solanus could do...they go down, they stop the organ, they stop the choir, they stop everything. Everybody is singing and rejoicing, and they just stop everything. Solanus takes the stole off...and he says, ‘Rob

and I are going to carry the stole out empty, for all of those who have never known this moment.’

“Oh, the whole place was just in tears,” Carol says with a warm smile. “And that’s probably one of the reasons I was called to the seminary – so that day could happen. It’s all connected. You can’t just say what did you do here and what did you do there. It’s in the stories. And what’s beautiful is that I’m old enough now that I can look back and see it.”

The story and braiding continues, one seemingly small event ushered down the path of Carol’s life, building and building until, when she reflects back, these small incidents turn out to be the pivotal moments in her journey. Earlier in the year, Solanus asked Carol to lead a spiritual retreat with students at Michigan State University Medical School where he is on medical faculty. Before Solanus graduated seminary, he and Carol began exploring ways to braid the practices of medicine and spirituality, and in January of 2017, more than twenty years later, Solanus and Carol did just that.

“See – it’s still going on!” Carol exclaims. “And if I had not said yes to Spirit’s urgings, if I had not taken the bull by the horns and held on, if I had not worked with the students to strive for equality for all of us, not just for those that someone judges are the deserving ones, what might have never happened? All of creation is sacred, every one of us is sacred. That’s all part of the Braided Way. That’s the story continuing.” Upon completion of the class that Carol taught at Michigan State Medical School, they asked her to come back the following year or sooner. Of the experience, Carol says, “Imagine, doctors who understood Spirit, who understood not all illness is from something physical. Imagine! I just think it’s totally exciting. This could have a tremendous impact on the practice of medicine as we know it.”

Carol’s life continued to braid new ways of expe-

riencing Spirit, and she continued to integrate more faith traditions and approaches to spirituality. In 1997 a friendship with Matthew Fox led to the invitation to become a part of the University for Creation Spirituality. Carol was brought in to co-direct the Doctor of Ministry Program and also to complement Dr. Fox's priest energy with her priestess energy for the monthly Cosmic Mass rituals. Carol was an administrator and faculty member and confidant, a ritual leader and student advisor. When she was consecrated as Bishop in the Independent Catholic tradition, she demanded that instead of the Bible, they use Matthew Fox's book *One River, Many Wells*, which is a braiding together of the sacred scriptures of world faiths.

When explaining the University of Creation Spirituality, Carol says, "And so Creation Spirituality, which is one of the things I hold as very important – makes sure we understand it's different from creationism. They're the opposite. Creation Spirituality stresses that everything is filled with spirit life. In fact the teaching is panentheism, which is everything is in God, or whatever you call it, and God is in everything. And God is more than everything. Everything is in God and God is in everything. But I don't like the word God so... the nameless. See, I think as soon as we give it a name, we've stuck it in a box because the name, the label, tells us what it's going to look like. And as soon as we do that, then it's not it. And it's way different from what we can put in a box, and that's why I don't like the word God. Because the word God has so much baggage. I think the old Jews had it right, they never said the word Yahweh – they never spoke it. It was too holy. They had it right."

Carol continues, "One of my favorite students – I've had a lot of brilliant, brilliant students. He says he belongs to the nameless religion, because there is no name. So, I like that. The problem is, with all the speaking and stuff I do, I have to find a way to talk about it. So I've played around with all this. I'm usually most comfortable with the word Spirit because it could mean so many things."

As Carol reflects on her comments, her eyes widen and she says, "In my experience there is only One way, with manifestation through each person's individuality. This means that there are as many ways to be essential to the One way as there are life experiences. More



importantly, each must be free to embrace divinity, the sacred, each other and the cosmos as each is called into the One. That's what the Braided Way is all about. I like to share this metaphoric image: The One way is like a massive diamond holding the radiance of limitless expressions. The result is Beauty that is unbearable to behold. Some call that God."

Now, Carol is pastor of an experimental congregation, HeartSpace, a ministry of 89 Hartford United Church of Christ. She continues to teach and explore spirituality in all its forms. She never gave up on her Catholic background; it is braided into her spiritual practice. Her house is adorned with icons from an open acceptance of world spiritual traditions: Native American, Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu and a variety of ingenious religions. A feather for smudging sage lays on her fireside hearth, candles for devotional prayer line her shelves, Native American hoop drums sit in the corner, paintings of Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and the Black Madonna hang on her walls. A medicine wheel is laid out in stones under a tree in her backyard. Then there's the domed frame of a Lakota-style sweat lodge in her backyard because one of her dear friends needed a space to conduct sweat lodge ceremonies. Of course, Carol offered her yard.

Her book, *The Lion of God: Archangel Ari'El, Personal Encounters*, was released in February of 2017. To learn more about Carol and her practices, please visit [89hartford.org](http://89hartford.org). ❖



KRISTIN WERSTLER is an English and writing major at the University of Mount Union and an intern for Braided Way Magazine.

# Living Without Grasping

## The Insight of Gratitude Photography

*Creating images focuses on the meaning of transformations, from small to large.*



BY PAUL KIMMERLING

I surprised myself a while back. Near the end of my monthly conversation with my spiritual director, I said, “This gives me hope that I can become poor and simple.” I am still unpacking that statement.

The genesis of the statement, I believe, began several years ago – during a difficult time of letting go of home, property and career. My pursuits since then – contemplation, some reading into the mystics, and the creation of a spiritual discipline I call “gratitude photography” – have led to this insight. It is about the liberation of letting go and the gratefulness of being.

For me, Francis of Assisi is one of the most evocative models of poverty. So, I’ll begin explaining the concept of living without attachment by quoting a little from The Mercy Blog, which explains:

...People usually translate the Latin phrase *sine proprio* as “without property,” or “poverty.” But as Francis of Assisi used it, perhaps a better translation would be “without possessing.”

Other sources, including references to the Giotto fresco of the same name (which graces the basilica in Assisi built to honor Francis), translate that phrase as “living without grasping.”

I am careful to distinguish this idea of living without grasping from voluntary material poverty as a spiritual practice; and, from the grinding involuntary poverty that oppresses millions. I write not to recommend a particular spiritual practice or path; nor to promote

political, financial and social change, as necessary as that seems to me and perhaps to you.

Rather, I write to reflect on my own journey, thus far, with the practice of living without grasping, as an interior condition of heart and mind. I come to this writing with a beginner’s enthusiasm and naiveté; with hope and with ignorance. This is what I know now, having been on the way for only a little while.

### “Take nothing for the journey.”

In an attempt to trace a through-line in my own journey from “back then” to now, I can see one of my own significant choices, birthed from a major job loss – a career-first, and a life-changer – in June 2012.

Having been gifted with a significant severance, I had the luxury of time to contemplate not merely my next job, but also the shape of my life to come. I was encouraged to imagine, to dream, to listen to my deeper longings. In a matter of months, clarity came. Another 9-5 routine was not my goal, although I was unsure what might replace that. Time, freedom and meaning seemed of primary importance.

The next step – sell my little weekend cottage so that my financial responsibilities would reflect my new situation. I could not very well pursue a new life without a steady paycheck and still hold firmly to the house. With a studio apartment as my primary residence, this seemed a luxury problem to have. Nonetheless, it provoked significant grief.

For 12 years, the cottage was my haven – a purchase

I made a few years after coming out and divorcing my wife. It eventually supported my growth in early 12-step recovery and my participation in a spiritual community. Its surroundings were no less important – set against the trees, with star-specked night-sky views, and a glorious garden that I cobbled together over time.

The garden and I fostered hope and beauty. We nurtured each other. The garden was my delight. And, it was the subject of endless photographs. I was never at a loss to find something of beauty or curiosity in those 800 square feet.

As I prepared to sell the house, and share that news with others, I leaned on a well-known New Testament exhortation: “Take nothing for the journey.” Coincidentally, this was key for St. Francis and his early companions and would become a cornerstone of their rule of life. To some degree, this quote served as a badge of honor, but also as a way to frame my decision within a larger frame. The text was also a reminder of my new intention and focus.

**“We don’t see things as they are; we see them as we are.”** *Anaïs Nin*

It seems profoundly true to me that grief is blinding. After selling the house, and living without my garden, I felt bereft of beauty. But was that true? If so, then I was doomed to a dreary existence. Knowing that the search for beauty had sustained me in past troubles, I set myself, and my camera, a challenge – to find beauty everywhere.

This kind of “living without grasping” helped me release my narrow notions of beauty, and where it could be found. I was willing to see things as they were, allowing them to have their own kind of beauty.

A few years into this experiment, I declare this kind of poverty to be liberating.

It is a method of self-emptying. When my identity, expectations and attention are less bound by my ego needs, my opinions and prejudices, then the world is full of possibilities when I look through the lens. So many things are beautiful, interesting, worthy in some way. It becomes hard to stop looking.

I take a daily “gratitude picture” as spiritual practice and proof-of-concept. How so? For one, the day’s picture is often taken within my 400+ square foot studio apartment. What on earth could I find, day after day,

that would be photo-worthy? I invite you to review my results, posted on Instagram (Paul Kimmerling on Instagram). On most days, the process embodies many of the attributes that various spiritual traditions claim – patience, hope, trust, and an open presence to the world.

**“Be still with yourself until the object of your attention affirms your presence.”**

This quote, from photographer Minor White, is very powerful for me. In stillness, the photographic process can seem reciprocal – what I am looking at, or for, will “affirm my presence”—almost as a cat that will come to rest in my lap once I have quieted. And, dare I say, this implies a relationship between my photographic subject and me. That, in fact, I am not in complete control; my subject has its own agency, and grants me an audience once I am fully present to it. “I see you,” I may say to my subject. When my subject says “I see you, too,” picture-making becomes a relational exchange.

It may be useful to draw a parallel with human relationships. When you know you have my undivided attention, you may reveal yourself more fully to me. Such a revelation cannot be coerced; you must sense my readiness to receive.

This relationship, between my subject and me, may start when something – for instance, the play of light – captures my attention. Or, when I open a drawer, or look down the hall. Or simply sit. Both my inner quiet and my curiosity facilitate this process. Sometimes, I feel literally compelled to consider something, as if it needs to be seen. That something may indeed be my final subject, or serve as a stopping point along the way.

I’ve also found that expectations can be the enemy of delight, disturbing my inner stillness. According to my understanding of Buddhist teaching, attachment is the basis of suffering – attachment to outcomes; how things should be, etc. In other words, when I grasp firmly onto expectations, my vision clouds. But, when I find myself in situations that are not what I hope for – or when I am simply impatient – I can choose to be open to see what is in front of me. This is one of the foundational elements of Buddhist mindfulness practice.

At its best, my daily exercise allows me to be in relationship with my subject. It becomes photography without grasping; photography as an open exchange between my subject and myself. It can feel like a reverential act.



Kimmerling 2016



Kimmerling 2015



Kimmerling 2016

### “Therefore, stay awake...”

As I reflect on my recent work with photography, and the surrender of my house before that, I recall that other significant surrenders have laid this groundwork. It became evident to me as I pondered this passage, read aloud one night at mid-week prayer:

Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Matthew 24: 42-44

On a literal level, I understand the urge to protect and defend one’s home – one’s family, especially the elderly and the young. If thievery is most successful when unsuspected, then constant vigilance is paramount. But if our spiritual goal is to be Awake, against what invasion do we stand guard? Perhaps things I hold dear must be removed to facilitate my spiritual growth?

I realize now that I have had quite a history of reluctance, and perhaps fear, about a personal kind of in-breaking – that of Truth and Wisdom – which challenged cherished assumptions, ways of being, or harmful habits that I had jealously grasped onto and nurtured. An in-breaking was most needed, yet most resisted or undervalued, especially when I firmly believed that my best thinking had gotten me so very far. But the cost of that journey—its treacherous twists and turns, and its unsavory roadside attractions—were not fully obvious to me then. They are now, as I look back through sober eyes.

The road behind me is littered with things I had

finally jettisoned, but had held close, sometimes long past the “use by” date. In those days, I was known for my tenacious grip. And, the holding-on was more costly than the letting go.

One of my favorite healing stories of the Christian testament is that of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. It contains a powerful question, spoken by Jesus: “What do you want me to do for you?”

How often do I ask for things for which I am not quite ready? I don’t mean because I am sick of my suffering. Rather, I am not ready because I am unaware of what I must give up – like my attachment to my own disease, which can very much define me – in order to be well. How compelling and all-defining to have an identity rooted in disease. How comforting, in a way, to know who we are, even if it’s through disease. One day, more than 13 years ago, I loosened my grasp on disease as identity. And, slowly, I became open to the in-breaking of Truth, and of Life.

Buddha was once asked, “What are you?” He replied: “I am awake.” From my experience, wakefulness is the beginning as well as the path. It allows me to recognize when I am grasping; to sense the moment my fingers begin to clench. Wakefulness facilitates choice – in this case, the choice to loosen my grip. So, that with open hands, I can participate in the glorious exchange of life.



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# What is Wisdom?

*Wisdom is not what to do, but how to be. Finding your foundation for being defines the spiritual journey throughout your lifetime.*

BY ROGER WALSH, MD, PHD

**Knowledge studies others,  
Wisdom is self-known.**

- Lao Tsu

Our world is awash with information, and we are drowning in data. Each day sees new discoveries, and a single newspaper tells more about the world than someone a few centuries ago learned in a lifetime.

Yet something is missing. We have knowledge aplenty, but wisdom? That's another story. A mere glance at the extent of suffering and insanity in the world makes it painfully clear that wisdom is in desperately short supply.

This lack is doubly sad because wisdom is essential not only for sane lives and societies, but also for awakening. No wonder it is so highly valued by all the great religions. Both Jews and Christians claim "the greatest

good is wisdom," while the Koran declares that "those to whom wisdom is given; they truly have received abundant good." In Hinduism the cultivation of wisdom constitutes one of the major spiritual paths or yogas, while Buddhism wisdom is something regarded as the preeminent spiritual capacity. What is wisdom and how do we foster it?

## What Wisdom is Not

Let's begin by clearing the ground and saying what wisdom is not. Wisdom is not simply intelligence or knowledge, nor is it equivalent to dramatic experiences or personal power. All these can be valuable but are also quite distinct from wisdom.

## Intelligence

Intelligence is the ability to learn, understand, and think clearly and logically. These are crucial capacities and can be employed to cultivate and express wisdom. However,

wisdom is much more than simple intelligence, because wisdom results from applying intelligence to understanding the central issues of life.

### Knowledge

Likewise, wisdom is more than knowledge. Taoism is very clear that “He who has learned is not wise.” Whereas knowledge simply acquires information, wisdom requires understanding it. Knowledge looks at things objectively; wisdom examines them subjectively to recognize their implications for life and how to live life well. Knowledge informs us, wisdom transforms us. Knowledge is something we have, wisdom is something we must become. Knowledge is expressed in words, wisdom in our lives. Knowledge empowers; wisdom empowers and enlightens. Buddhism claims:

One momentary glimpse of Divine Wisdom  
born of meditation is more precious  
than any amount of knowledge.

### Dramatic Experiences

Dramatic experiences, even powerful spiritual ones, are also not proof of wisdom. Anyone who does long-term, intensive spiritual practice will sooner or later be visited by remarkable experiences, including ecstatic visions, powerful emotions, and penetrating insights. Yet visions and insights can be wrong, and all experiences disappear. Powerful experiences are not necessarily proof of wisdom, nor do they all necessarily lead to wisdom. What is crucial is how we relate to and learn from our experiences. This is one of the vital secrets of spiritual practice.

Spectacular experiences can either seduce us or inspire us. If they seduce us, we become attached and try to prolong and repeat them rather than letting go and growing beyond them. We then forget that, in the words of St. Gregory of Nyssa: “The graces that we receive at every point are indeed great, but the path that lies beyond our immediate grasp is infinite.”

Even more destructive is to use powerful experiences not for self-transcendence, but for self-aggrandizement to make ourselves seem special, important, or enlightened. This can happen very swiftly. Many times I have deep insight, and then in the very next moment caught my mind swelling with pride and planning

how to announce my discovery to the world. This is spiritual materialism, the tendency to become attached to spiritual experiences and pervert them for egocentric purposes. The following Zen story is useful antidote.

A young monk suddenly jumped up from his meditation cushion and ran to his teacher’s room. Without even pausing to take off his shoes, he barged in on his teacher, who was sitting reading, and breathlessly announced that he had just seen a vision of a golden Buddha radiating light.

“Don’t worry,” replied the teacher without even looking up from the book. “If you keep meditating it will go away.”

Of course, deep experiences can lead to wisdom. But they must be carefully examined, tested, discussed with a teacher, and used for learning and nonattachment. Wisdom can grow from experience but is considerably more than just experience.

### Personal Power

Wisdom is also much more than personal power. A powerful teacher can be very seductive to students who believe power and charisma must be signs of spiritual maturity.

This is far from true. Teachers come in all shapes and sizes. Some have commanding personalities; others are quiet and retiring. It is crucial not to mistake personality and power for profundity.

Power can be all the more seductive if it involved apparent psychic abilities. The existence of psychic abilities has been one of the most fiercely debated topics in science, with enormous amounts of hot air and insults hurled back and forth for over a century. Anyone who believes scientists always operate calmly and rationally can be cured of this belief by reading the literature on parapsychology. Growing evidence seems to the existence of psychic capacities, though the effects are usually very small.

The great religions agree the psychic powers are possible. They also agree, however, that these powers are not signs of wisdom or spiritual maturity and are infinitely less important than the goal of liberation. The great religions tend to view psychic abilities as mere sideshows, not to be deliberately sought. If the powers do emerge, they should be used sparingly and only for the good of others. An ancient myth makes this point well.



The Buddha and his disciples once came to a river where they patiently waited for a boatman to offer them a ride. While they waited, the Buddha taught a group of lay people who gathered around him. Suddenly a yogi who had devoted years to developing psychic powers appeared. Wanting to impress the crowd, he walked across the river and back again, and then challenged the Buddha to match his feat.

“Tell me,” asked the Buddha. “How much is the boat fare across the river?”

“Not much, just a few coins,” answered the surprised yogi.

“And that’s how much your psychic powers are worth,” responded the Buddha.

## Defining Wisdom

Wisdom is deep understanding and practical skill in the central issues of life, especially existential and spiritual issues.

Existential issues are those crucial and universal concerns all of us face simply because we are human. They include finding meaning a purpose in our lives; managing relationships and aloneness; acknowledging our limits and smallness in a universe vast beyond comprehension; living in inevitable uncertainty and mystery; and dealing with sickness, suffering, and death. A person who has developed deep insights into these issues – and skills for dealing with them – is wise indeed.

## The Two Aspects of Wisdom

### Vision and Understanding

The visionary aspect of wisdom comes from seeing deeply and clearly, penetrating below surface appear-

ances to recognize the deeper nature of things and life. To do this requires highly refined awareness characterized by clarity, subtlety, and penetrating power. This penetrating power comes in large part from concentration, and in classical Buddhism concentration is described as the preceding or immediate cause of wisdom.

Vision provides the institutions from which understanding is born. Clear, concentrated vision sees things as they are, and understanding is born from actively investigating and analyzing the way things are. Investigation is so illuminating that Buddhists list it as one of the seven factors of enlightenment, those qualities and capacities of mind essential for deep awakening. A neo-Confucian sage promised: “If one plumbs, investigates into, sharpens, and refines himself, a morning will come when he will gain self-enlightenment.”

Likewise, the great neo-Confucian Wang Yang-Ming reported his own enlightenment came when he realized the significance of the phrase “investigate things so that knowledge may be extended to the utmost.”

By investigating things, wisdom is able to identify crucial principals and implications for living well. At a simple level, it recognizes cause-and-effect relationships such as, “This kind of behavior leads to suffering; that way of thinking promotes happiness.” At a more sophisticated level, wisdom is able to create whole psychologies and philosophies that precisely formulate and explain the visionary insights of wisdom and their practical applications.

The visionary aspect of wisdom sees and explores three things: life, mind, and the nature of reality.

### Life

Wisdom explores and reflects on the nature of life, especially on the causes of happiness and the causes and cures of suffering in the world, most of it caused by people blinded by destructive forces such as greed or hatred. Wisdom sees that some actions – for example, unethical or greedy ones – lead to short-term pleasure and greater long-term pain, whereas others – for example, being ethical and generous – lead to enduring well-being. So often people fail to recognize this, so they live in ways that thwart the possibility of happiness.

Visionary wisdom sees the conventional ways of living are rife with suffering. Practical wisdom begins when a

person recognizes there must be a better way to live and commits to finding it. The quest to awaken begins.

## Mind

Wisdom recognizes the awesome power of the mind to both create and cloud our experience, to produce ecstasy and suffering, and to learn or stagnate. Once you appreciate the all-consuming power of the mind, learning how your mind works and how to train it become vital goals.

Wisdom sees that the untrained mind is wild and uncontrolled. But it also recognizes that the mind can be trained, tamed, transformed, and transcended, and that this is the essential means for fostering happiness, love, altruism, and liberation. Training your mind becomes a pressing priority; this training in turn fosters the growth of wisdom.

## The Nature or Reality

By probing deeply into their own experience, wise people see deeply into the fundamental nature of reality. In doing so, they begin to rediscover aspects of the perennial philosophy. For them this is no mere theoretical knowledge, but is rather a direct personal recognition born of their penetrating explorations of life, the world, and the mind.

Wise people learn a great deal that remains hidden to the ordinary person, yet paradoxically they also learn there are limits to learning. Knowledge is always partial, the intellect limited, our understanding finite in an infinite universe of unfathomable mystery. Recognition and acceptance of these limits are aspects of wisdom and also, as we will see, essential means for developing it.

## Practical or Applied Wisdom

Practical wisdom is skill in living, especially responding to the central, existential issues of life. It is a way of living that expresses the visionary and understanding aspects of wisdom. At its deepest it is living *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity, or as Taoists would say, “in alignment with the Tao.”

Vast vision and profound understanding lead to an appreciation of “natural law,” and also of “natural ethics” and the “natural lifestyle.” These are, respectively, legal systems, ethics, and lifestyles rooted in, harmonious with, and awakening us to the fundamental nature of reality.

The Confucian ideal of the noble person or holy person (*sheng-jen*) embodies these ideas. The noble person, it is said, “complies perfectly with all the principals, lives in harmony with nature and society, and is the peerless teacher of age.”

People at all stages of development may strive to be ethical and kind, but perhaps only mystical experience and its resultant wisdom provide an unequivocal answer to the fundamental question, “Why be moral?” Without direct recognition of our unity with all people and all life, we can only try to think our way into justifying moral life, by considering ideas of justice and different people’s viewpoints. Such reasoning is obviously very valuable but may also be limited, and the pioneering researcher of moral development, Lawrence Kohlberg, concluded:

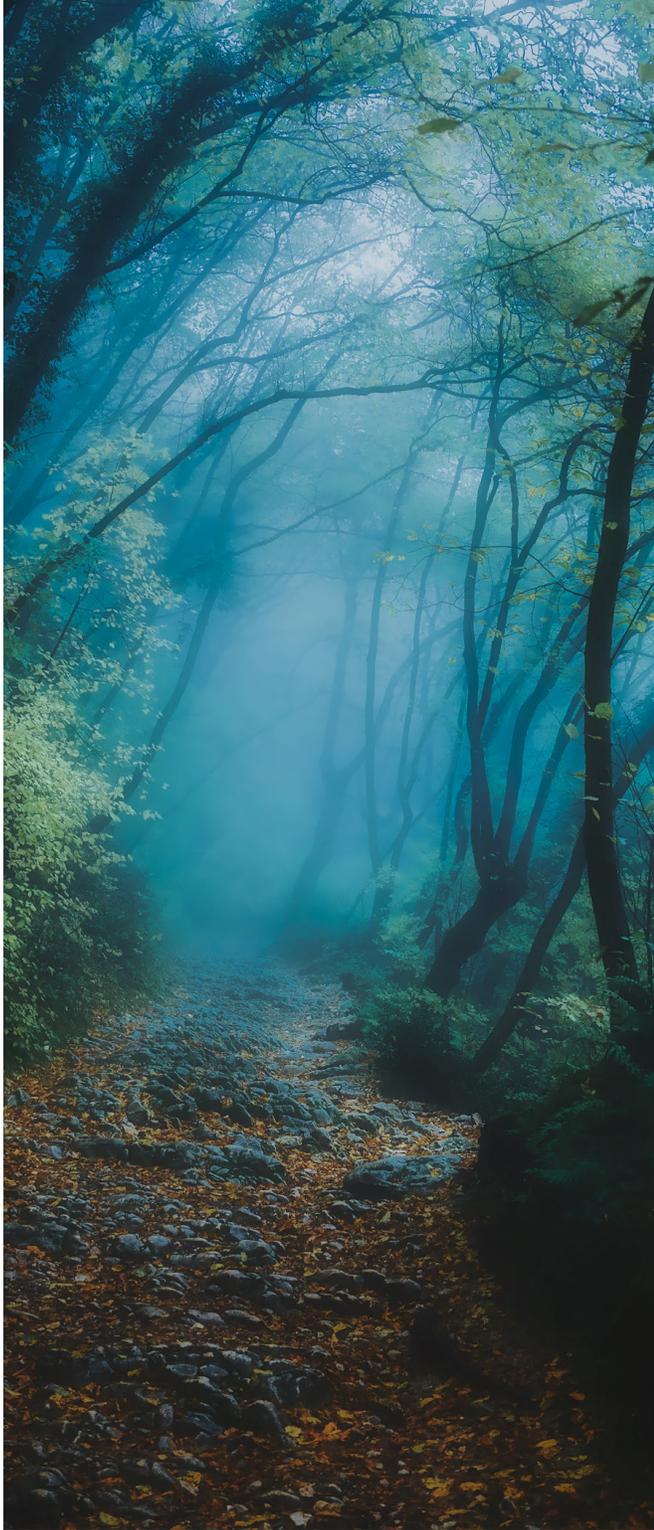
Not even the highest possible stage of justice reasoning can adequately answer the question “Why be moral?” The only ethical-ontological orientation that appears capable of generating a fully adequate resolution to ultimate moral questions such as “Why be moral?” “Why be just in a world that is seemingly unjust?” is a cosmic perspective. Such an orientation appears also to rely upon some type of transcendental or mystical experience – experience of a level at which self and the universe seem unified.

Mystical experience provides the foundation for mature wisdom, which in turn fosters mature transpersonal ethics, motivations, emotions, and service. Wisdom therefore leads us to live harmoniously and compassionately with others. These centuries-old claims have recently found support from researchers who concluded that the wise people they studied “transcend personal agendas and turned toward collective or universal issues.” Buddhism call this the union of wisdom and compassion, because wisdom naturally finds expression in service to others. ☸



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# May the Path be Beautiful for Everyone

*Native American languages expand our understanding of spiritual life.*

BY EVAN PRITCHARD

There is an expression in Lenape Delaware (Munsee/Unami) that goes, “Wa-ni-shi,” which is a way of saying “Thank you!” but literally means, “May the way be beautiful for you.” The word elides several words. First is Wah, which means “beauty, goodness, peace, love, white-light,” and more, and is a root syllable for variants of these words. Then there is Aan, which means “path or road.” Nee means “I” and Tchi could mean “great.” But “wish for you” is also implied. One says this as a gift to the person who has done something for you, because exchange is the essence of survival on earth, helping Creation to continue.

However, the word “path” has many layers of meaning, and does not simply mean a dirt path on the ground. It refers to the right way to live, a harmonious way of life that helps Creation to continue, that moves us forward, spiritually. Each Native American language I’ve encountered has a similarly profound meaning for a word for “path.” It appears that the word for “pathfinder” often implies someone who helps others find their direction in life. There is no word in the English language for what I’m talking about, so some readers may need time to think about this. It is not surprising, in that languages differ greatly in their world view. What was surprising to me is that English was the ONLY language I could find that did NOT have a word for this. It would seem that Anglophones are at a unique disadvantage! I hope the following journey into linguistics is of some help in bridging this weird and surprising gap in the global culture.

Although I am a person of Native American and Celtic ancestry, and consider myself to have been raised more or less in the values and beliefs of the Mi’kmaq traditions, I have always been keenly interested in how people around the world perceive God and themselves spiritually.

I learned from an early age that all human beings are our relations, as are the animals, plants, fish, moon, and stars. I also understood that any of these—a bird, a child, an old man—could become a messenger to us at a certain moment, and so I listened to people of all denominations and kept praying for good messages and for good visions. It is not surprising, then, that I soon came into contact with organized religion.

Although I grew up within walking distance of my spiritual temple – the woods and hills of Maryland – I

was also not far from a world cultural center, Washington, D.C., which in the 1960s was filled with a wide variety of spiritual activities. Religious leaders of all stripes and colors came to visit Washington and speak out on “what was wrong with America.” Before I drove a car – the modern-day coming of age initiation for urban Indians – I’d already had the opportunity to meet and ask questions of Martin Buber, the Talmudic philosopher; the Reverend David Eaton, a black minister, talk show host, and friend of Martin Luther King, Jr.; Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Jewish storyteller; Sri Chin Moy, the Pakistani poet and yogi; Brahmachari Keith, a disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda; and Dr. Mael Melvin, an astrophysicist at Temple University and one of the founders of the Transcendental Meditation movement. I also learned a lot from the monks at Catholic University, where I studied religion and philosophy as part of the regular curriculum, and from street people who had earned divine insight from hard suffering on the front lines of life.

It was a wonderful way to spend one’s youth, and I learned that many of the negative stereotypes we hear about people whose religions are “different” are not true, at least not for those who have been truly touched by the God of their ancestors, be it Allah, Brahma, or Jehovah. I found my teachers everywhere, in all traditions, and learned to call them my friends. It didn’t hurt that my father read to us from Joseph Campbell’s expansive multicultural book *Hero with a Thousand Faces* at the dinner table when we were in high school.

But outside of my own family, none of my teachers was Native American. For much of that time, Native American elders had been excluded from this multicultural dialogue about God. And yet, all along, the Native American teaching “We all belong here; we are all part of the great hoop of life” had helped form the foundation of religious tolerance in America and Canada. It is part of certain Native American teachings that different

racess and cultures are like the colors of the rainbow: they blend and yet retain their distinct identity. This Native principle for an inclusive, healthy society was enjoyed to a certain extent by most North Americans, yet not by Native North Americans themselves. In my youth, I applied that rainbow principle to religion and was richly rewarded. I feel it is appropriate for religion



The essential message that unifies Native American wisdom teaching is clear: “The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.”

to offer that colorful invitation to Native Americans to foster a dialogue that is well overdue.

In 1989, when I finally connected with the Native American elders I had been looking for all those years, I was able to immediately see for myself how truly gifted they were and how valuable they could be to the world community. The wisdom I had hunted for all that time had been in my backyard all along. Meeting and talking with outstanding teachers of

all nations had helped me recognize that here was the very thing that had been missing from my own life and, to a troubling extent, from the worldwide interfaith dialogue as well. I saw that many of the languages and oral traditions were dying out and began to write down what I could in order to preserve that indigenous knowledge. I am not extending that to story as well. Constance DeJong once said, “Legends that are passed down by word of mouth are legends lost.” In our society, that seems to be more and more the situation, although it was not always so.

One unifying feature of Native American belief is the concept of the “Red Road,” though each tribe and nation also has its own name for it. Black Elk speaks of the Red Road in the book *The Sacred Pipe*. In Mi’kmaq, the “way of truth” is called agulamz. In Cherokee, the “way of good” is dohi (do-hi). The Hopi speak of the good red road that leads to a world that is healthy and safe for raising children. The Navajo call it “the beauty way,” which I have learned to live more effectively by returning to my own traditions.

I have found no one word in English that truly

describes this “way.” However, a similar version of this word exists in at least a dozen ancient cultures all over the world. If you research these enigmatic words for many years, as I have done, I think you will come to the same conclusion. Each eludes an exact definition, yet each invokes, substantially, “the right way.”

In China, the word Tao means “the path.” Although they say “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the Tao,” this word implies more than simply wise ways to behave in human interactions—it also encompasses “the path” of things in nature and in the realm of the eternal. This is remarkably close to the fullness of meanings implied by the Red Road. Indeed, some Native American elders who have never read a book have spoken words about the Red Road that almost perfectly match those of Lao Tzu, the Chinese sage to whom we credit the Tao te Ching.

Another example from Hindu religion, more correctly called Sanatana Dharma, is the word dharma (dhamma in the Pali Canon), which originally carried all the same associations as Tao and the Red Road. Later, possibly around the time of Ashoka, dharma took on the additional meaning of law as a way of demanding that people actually put these principles into practice.

In the Celtic language family there is a word that is sometimes spelled Fi-rhinne (pronounced with a rolled r), which is associated with virtue, but which can be interpreted in a variety of ways: One with Fi-rhinne would be courageous, forthright, reliable, and truthful.

In Islam, the word Shari’a means “the path,” but, like dharma, came to also mean “law,” and is the basis of Islamic law. In Egypt the word ma’at referred to universal justice, but also to virtue, similar to the Celtic word. During the rise of Pharaonic power, the Pharaohs took exclusive control of ma’at and said that only they could understand all the levels of meaning of ma’at, or could truly be virtuous. At some point, the universal principle called ma’at became embodied by the goddess Ma’at,

who was the forerunner of the Greek goddess of justice, whose picture is displayed prominently in many courtrooms in America. When Egyptians went to the world of the dead, they had to face Ma’at. His or her heart was removed and placed in her balanced scales, where it was weighed against a falcon’s feather; if it was heavier than the feather, the person had to face Ma’at’s judgment. This recalls the Native American saying, “Enjoy life but leave no tracks.” We need to take things lightheartedly in order to pass beyond the gates of Ma’at’s temple. A

lighthearted person does not leave a trail of injustices behind.

I have been told that the Hebrew word Halakhah was in ancient times the word that referred to the good way. Not enough people were able to grasp for themselves what the good way really was or how a good person should act, so the various commandments in the Torah—the first five books of the Hebrew Bible—were made into a list of 613 mitzvot (plural for mitzvah, “commandment”). This list can be found in the Talmud, although there is more than one version.

In Sami, the language of the Sami people (who are often incorrectly called “Lapps” and whose territory is often incorrectly called Lapland), the pathfinder, or way-shower, is called the nojadi. In Slavic

(Russian) the word doroga means “roadway,” and is related to drog, the Old Chinese for Tao, and related to the English word “duty.” However the Russian word put’ (pronounced “poodt”) today carries the mystical meaning of “the path we walk.”

There are many more examples from all over the world of such words that have survived even though their parent languages are nearly extinct: words showing us that at one time everyone may have shared a common mystical belief in a “right way” for humankind to follow. In the film *Good Enough for Two*, Mi’kmaq canoe builder Todd Labrador relates how his father told him that in the forest, all trees may seem to be separate, but underneath the ground, they are holding hands—their roots inter-



It is part of certain Native American teachings that different races and cultures are like the colors of the rainbow: they blend and yet retain their distinct identity.

twine in a great web of life, regardless of species. In a similar way, I feel that the Red Road teachings and the Native American spiritual philosophy as a whole offer the people of the world a view of these common “Taoistic” roots and a source of inspiration for re-examining their own natural origins, which are intertwined.

Following the Red Road, I founded the Center for Algonquin Culture, a nonprofit organization in service to the elders of the Algonquin (and other) nations, to help them bring their spiritual message more effectively to the mass media. Some elders do not wish for notoriety, feeling that it would interfere with their work. Others, such as William Commanda, who holds the Seven Fires Wampum Belt that embodies prophecies given to the Algonquin people over 700 years ago (and who has met with the Dalai Lama on several occasions), and Eddie Benton Benaise, the Medicine Chief of the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge (and who has a master’s degree in comparative religion), are becoming well known to the public. There are many others. The change is about to happen.

William Commanda wrote:

My peoples have been crushed for a long time.... We see churches, cathedrals, synagogues, temples and mosques reflecting the great diversity of cultures here [in North America] but there is still no place where indigenous peoples can gather together in the spirit of unity that used to mark our heritage.

Over recent years, I have... said that Turtle Island would not find true peace until the relationship with the first peoples of this land was healed and we occupied our rightful position in the heart of this country.... But my ancestors used to say the most nutritious walnuts emerge after the coldest winter. In my mind, it is the indigenous peoples who hold the seeds for a vision of inclusion and collective sharing, respect, and responsibility.

[This is why,] with the commencement of the United Nations Decade for a Culture of Peace, I began to pursue the work of developing a vision for a fully inclusive indigenous peace-building cultural centre on Victoria Island [near Parliament in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada].

The essential message that unifies Native American wisdom teaching is clear: “The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.” Whether or not Chief Seattle really said this is disputed, but it makes no difference; thousands of Native Americans had said it before he was ever born, and thousands have said it since, and I’m saying it now. It is a teaching that is not totally unknown within the great world religions. The Arabic word *hilafa*, for example, refers to a stewardship “bestowed in trust” in Islam; and in the Qur’an (10:14), the angels state, “Thus we have made you to succeed one another as stewards on the earth, that We might behold how you acquit yourselves.” *Shomrei Adamah* means “Guardians of the Earth” in Hebrew and refers to a group within Judaism that places emphasis on the Jewish traditions that honor the earth, such as *Tu B’shevat*, the Jewish New Year of the Trees, and *Bal Tashchit*, the biblical prohibition against wasteful behavior. Each major faith has one or more branches or leaders who do honor the earth in this way, but typically these groups and leaders are misunderstood—and marginalized—by their own religious organizations.

The path of honoring the earth is not an easy one. Although it promises seven generations of gain, it does require short-term sacrifices. It has never been a popular path, and not enough people have walked it. In order to truly change our destructive ways, we need to have an emotional connection to Mother Earth, perhaps even a religious zeal about our relationship with her. Almost all of the elders I have worked with have this zeal. Sometimes it surprises me still. This emotional connection affects every aspect of traditional culture, and unless people of all cultures and races learn to embrace this ancient teaching as their own indigenous ancestors once did, I fear that we are not to last as a species. We need to pay attention to the hell on earth we could be creating out of the paradise that is God’s handiwork. ✘



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# In the Hands of the Spiritual Director

*Explore the differences between mental health counseling and spiritual direction.*

BY JENNIFER OLIN-HITT

It's not uncommon for Americans in our 21st century to find their way to a mental health clinic. In the U.S. today, according to the DSM-5, 46 percent of adults are likely to develop a diagnosable mental disorder throughout their lifetime.

Not all intrapersonal suffering can be summed up in a diagnosis, however. The human condition is filled with moments and seasons of struggle that are not categorized neatly in a mental health reference, such as the DSM-5. Loss can lead to deep grief. Ethical dilemmas in the workplace can open up great turmoil of conscience. Mid-life can bring questions of meaning. Children challenge our values. Some of us wake up in the night with questions of existence: what is my purpose? Is there life beyond this life? For questions and moments such as these, the struggling person may turn to a Spiritual Director. What follows is a brief overview of Spiritual Direction as well as some ways that Spiritual Direction intersects with Mental Health Therapy.

## A Movement Toward Soul Wholeness

Spiritual Directors are those who, most typically, help individuals move towards greater soul wholeness. While I am most familiar with Spiritual Direction from within the Christian Mystical context, Spiritual Direction is an ancient practice that has roots in most of the major world religions. A spiritual tradition (be it Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Pagan, Indigenous, etc.) is the weaving together of a worldview - questions, teaching, ritual, values, and community - all for the sake of passing along meaning and purpose to its adherents. Within these spiritual communities, throughout the centuries, Spiritual Directors function as healers, teachers, guides, and mid-wives. They often meet one-on-one with a seeker. They listen to stories of soul-sickness and struggle. They help a person to name stories of hope and to discover resources of strength within their particular spiritual tradition or within the even larger framework of braided spiritual questing.

The title Spiritual Director is somewhat of a misnomer. The Spirit is the true Director. The human Spiritual Director is simply one who is trained in knowing the questions to ask. She herself is a seeker, and she knows the terrain of spiritual questing. A Spiritual Director does not have a textbook answer for the suffering person. Rather, a Spiritual Director spends much of her time simply being available to the Spiritual Companion who has come to explore. Sometimes Spiritual Direction is simply a Ministry of Presence: to laugh with those who laugh and to weep with those who weep. The Spiritual Director can help the Companion savor the best of the human experience and to hope for a better day during the times of suffering.

## The Many Forms of Spiritual Direction

The most typical form of Spiritual Direction is a 60- to 90-minute session in a quiet place where conversation can flow between Spiritual Director and Spiritual Companion. In this way, Spiritual Direction does share commonalities with Mental Health Therapy. It often is a verbal exercise: the externalizing of pain and suffering through the telling of stories and the speaking of words. Like an effective Mental Health Therapist, the Spiritual Director knows how to actively listen, to reframe the challenges, to ask

questions in ways that open up greater conversation. However, unlike Mental Health Therapy, Spiritual Direction often feels less goal-oriented. The Mental Health Therapist may help the client increase his parenting skills or de-escalate anxiety. The interventions of the Mental Health Therapist are future-oriented and change-focused. Spiritual Direction conversations are often very present-focused. A Spiritual Director may help her Companion to reflect upon how God typically communicates. A Spiritual Director may guide his Companion to listen in a new way for Wisdom or he may help his companion discern untapped resources of Hope. Through this encounter, great interpersonal and intrapersonal change might happen, but such change comes as result of a spiritual experience, not as the stated goal.

Spiritual Direction often is a multi-sensory experience. A Pagan Spiritual Director might invite her Companion to walk in the woods and listen for new sounds. A Buddhist Spiritual Director may focus on the act of sitting meditation. At the Haden Institute for Spiritual Direction ([hadeninstitute.com](http://hadeninstitute.com)) where I trained in Flat Rock, North Carolina, mornings would begin with yoga along the lake. Evenings would wind down with music circles. It was not uncommon to visit the art room to paint the memory of a night dream. A poem or a piece of sacred writing would often become a springboard for guided meditation. During those intensive training workshops, invariably I discovered a new way to envision the Holy and to imagine my own life path unfolding. During one particularly painful season of vocational questioning, multiple visits to the art room helped me to externalize a fear I had buried. I shared the picture with my own Spiritual Director, and the process helped me to experience greater courage within myself.

## Some Practicalities of Spiritual Direction

Unlike the mental health professions, Spiritual Direction in the United States has no ties to managed health care. This means that a Spiritual Director may practice without a state license, because there is no such state licensing board. Depending upon one's perspective, this freedom is an asset or a liability to Spiritual Direction. On the one hand, a Spiritual Direction practice can be unencumbered from weighty overhead and the strings of institutional bureaucracy. The Spiritual Director can

be free to focus on the relationship and on the process of healing. On the other hand, such freedom can lead to lack of accountability. As a practicing Spiritual Director, I strongly advocate those who would call themselves Spiritual Directors to receive training from a reputable organization. Most of the major spiritual traditions have seminaries and training centers that certify practitioners to provide ethical and responsible Spiritual Direction. If you wish to work with a Spiritual Director, take some time to interview her. Ask about her training, and if she herself receives regular on-going Spiritual Direction.

Spiritual Directors International ([sdiworld.org](http://sdiworld.org)) is the largest network of world-wide Spiritual Direction practices. While they do not accredit Spiritual Directors, SDI does serve as an international network that connects Spiritual Directors with each other and with resources to improve our work in the field. SDI hosts international conferences and publicizes its members' profiles so that seekers can discover who and what is available.

Generally, a Spiritual Director will charge something for her services. While this sometimes has been a controversial topic, I advocate the practice for several reasons:

- A fee will set boundaries around the time of Spiritual Direction, helping to maintain the sense that this is an agreed-upon relationship.
- In our American culture, the offering of payment implies an investment in the process.
- Spiritual Directors are usually people who are never going to “get rich” from their work, but they have invested time and resources in their training and personal development. Often a fee is a practical reality, necessary for the Spiritual Director to maintain the best practice possible.

Each geographic area seems to have ranges of fee structures for Spiritual Direction. And most every Spiritual Director I know offers alternatives if the fee is simply too much for the Companion to offer (sliding fee or the trading of services, although this second practice comes with its own set of challenges).

### An Important Alliance

The sacred texts of all world religions as well as our history books show that people throughout human history have struggled. We read of mystical visions, great



longing for union, journeys of suffering, and moments of ecstasy. In response to the human condition, throughout cultures and times, many diverse people have devoted their lives to help alleviate intrapersonal suffering and to magnify wellness. While our 21st century values the medical model of Mental Health Therapy, there is a growing body of contemporary people who also value the effectiveness of Spiritual Direction. The wise Spiritual Director will know when her Companion is struggling with a condition best approached by a Mental Health Therapist. But just as importantly, a Mental Health Therapist would do well to recognize a Mystery that extends beyond clinical treatment goals. In our world of both Spirit and Matter, suffering persons need the best of both worlds – Mental Health Therapists who understand the complexities of diagnoses and social systems, but also Spiritual Directors who walk with Companions into the mystery of Spirit. ✕



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# Consulting the Soul

BY ISABELLA COLALILLO KATZ

you ask for a quality of grace  
consulting the river of ecstasy  
autumn eyes blinking  
    the fog  
a lostness

death breathes in many languages  
light lingers on a distant tree  
its bark opening to evening stars  
the air is smitten with halo  
my skin is an archetype for mother  
    love enters  
through the turnstile at the edge of the meadow

even fireflies need mercy  
I know this with certainty  
I invite them to sing for my sadness  
they bring coyote songs and dances  
    my hands  
orphaned and grim  
touch my eyes of fire

pain holds the heart like a blossom  
    its lament  
a fresh picked apple

we listen to laughter and leaves  
    their photosynthesis  
transforms mother to thread to child  
and far away  
the mountains hold the trail of my frenzy  
    drowning in familiar and fear

I linger darkly  
under a sky of metal and grace  
the open mouth of time  
    mirrors the face the of pure  
the soul is an equation of trust  
connecting all channels of will

ISABELLA COLALILLO-KATZ is a poet, writer, editor, translator, storyteller and mother in Toronto, Canada. She works as professor and psychotherapist and leads workshops and classes in creativity and creative writing.



## Spiritual integration reveals the way of all ways

### The Braided Way Magazine Mission

Braided Way Magazine celebrates and explores the diversity of our world's faith traditions. Our publication and activities aim to support an individual's spiritual development, while influencing our larger culture toward inter-spiritual (and inter-religious) understanding, acceptance and engagement. The ultimate goal of Braided Way Magazine (along with our parent organization Spiritual Quest Foundation) is to foster communities to establish a spiritual foundation to meet the cultural and ecological crises of our age. We believe that in order to place humanity into balance with Earth and society, a spiritual awareness of diversity and expansion must be cultivated.

### The Braided Way Vision

Braided Way Magazine is guided by the ideal that all world faiths and their spiritual practices are braided together. Each faith is a strand in the braid of sacred awareness, adding a unique view and experience to the whole. The magazine provides a forum for practitioners of spiritual disciplines from various world faiths, with the intention of providing guidance and insight to readers from varied spiritual perspectives. In so doing, the aim of Braided Way Magazine is to guide and nurture people to become open and accepting of different spiritual perspectives and practices and to engage in cross-traditional or inter-spiritual experiences.

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