

 CHAPTER I*The Wisdom Way of Knowing*

“What is truth? *You* can see where there is truth and where there isn’t, but I seem to have lost my sight, I see nothing. You boldly settle all the important questions, but tell me, my dear boy, isn’t it because you are young and the questions of the world haven’t hurt you yet?”

—ANTON CHEKHOV, *The Cherry Orchard*

Eagle Island, Maine, late September 2001.

The air was still thick with the smoldering wreckage of the World Trade Center towers in New York as a small black lobster boat pulled up at the wharf and about a dozen of us piled ashore with our sleeping bags, backpacks, and prayer stools. From all over North America, we had gathered on this tiny Maine fishing island to try our hand at something both very old and very new. For the seven days we spent together under the watchful care of our hosts Bob and Helene Quinn, we arose at dawn for sacred chanting and silent meditation. A simple breakfast cooked over a woodstove in the old farmhouse kitchen, an hour-long class on spiritual practice, then two hours

of hard physical labor—stacking firewood, piling lobster traps, preparing and pouring a concrete foundation. Lunch; an hour for individual rest and relaxation, then two hours of chanting, movement, and meditation before another hour-long class, this time on sacred cosmology, the ancient road maps of human wholeness. A simple dinner and wash-up, then a final evening gathering for reflection on the day's work and closing prayers or Eucharist before the silence of the night again enfolded us.

It was simple, profoundly simple. And inefficient, deeply inefficient. In terms of academic content, the material could have been covered in fifteen hours of instructional time in a far more centralized location. And yet as the week unfolded, my colleague Lynn Bauman and I recognized that we were in the midst of the most exciting and moving teaching of our lives. By the end of the week, the whole group of us was thinking and seeing and sharing at a level not only far beyond our usual selves but almost with one mind and one heart. The air was filled with an energy and a palpable compassion and clarity that seemed to extend far beyond our small island to a world whose course had been suddenly and irrevocably altered. No one, of course, had foreseen that the first annual Eagle Island Wisdom School would follow so closely on the heels of the events of September 11, but in its shadow our time together was imbued with a newfound sense of purpose that what we were doing was no longer merely a spiritual luxury but a prophetic first step toward the recovery of a vision of human purpose badly eclipsed—and desperately needed—in the Western world.

Veteran retreatgoers among you, by whichever the spiritual path—Buddhist, Sufi, Benedictine, Fourth Way, yoga—will notice many familiar elements in the daily schedule of our Wisdom School. Most of the great spiritual traditions recognize the rhythm of *ora et labora*, as it's known in the Benedictine tradition—"prayer and work"—as essential to a deepening spiritual formation. But often the practice is simply taken at face value: as a necessary decorum of the path or a way to give service or to ground the energy generated in meditation. What is not often enough recognized is that this rhythm greatly enhances the power to *think*, to understand and bend one's being around truths not usually accessible at our ordinary level of awareness.

In this short book I want to speak about Wisdom and specifically about the recovery of a genuine wisdom dimension to our individual lives and to our common life. Most of the readers of this book, I assume, will be citizens of the "privileged" First World nations, probably of the United States or Canada, as I am myself. But what does this privilege really translate into in terms of satisfaction and quality of life? Beneath the surface of our well-being, a malaise—perhaps even a crisis of meaning—has long been brewing. For all our affluence, stress and anxiety seem to be higher than ever, family life is in disarray, and the rushing to keep up leaves us empty and exhausted. The Old Testament prophet Haggai sounds like he could be speaking directly to us in these words, which are more than two thousand years old: "So now . . . think; take stock; what do you *really* want? You eat but still hunger; you drink but

still thirst; you clothe yourselves but can't get warm, and your wages run out through the holes in your pockets.”<sup>1</sup>

Some insights are perennially true, whether the culture is ancient Israel or modern North America. When the center starts to wobble, it's a pretty sure bet that what's lacking is not means but *depth*: a vision rich and sustaining enough to contain all this restless striving and shape it into a more universal and subtle understanding of human purpose. “Think; take stock; what do you *really* want?” This is the traditional terrain of Wisdom.

Notice that I capitalize the word *Wisdom*, for I am referring not simply to a generic or subjective quality of being but to a far more precise lineage of spiritual knowledge. Wisdom is an ancient tradition, not limited to one particular religious expression but at the headwaters of all the great sacred paths. From time immemorial there have been Wisdom schools, places where men and women have been raised to a higher level of understanding, partly by enlightened human beings and partly by direct guidance from above. From time immemorial, it is said, Wisdom has flowed like a great underground stream from these schools, providing guidance and nurturance, as well as occasional sharp course corrections, to the flow of human history.

One of the greatest losses in our Christian West has been the loss of memory (in fact, almost a collective amnesia) about our own Wisdom heritage. Many people, hearing about Wisdom in the way I've just written, imagine that I am describing an alien tradition—unaware that the first title given to Jesus by his

immediate band of followers was a *moshel meshalim*, “master of Wisdom.” In the Near Eastern culture into which he was born, the category was well known, and his methods were immediately recognizable as part of it. He taught *mashal*, parables and Wisdom sayings. He came to help people awaken.

But awakening is not that easy, and as a *moshel meshalim*, Jesus had mixed success. As the four Gospels all record, some people glimpsed what he was saying while others missed it altogether. Some people got it part of the time and missed it the rest. Some people woke up and others remained asleep. Which leads us back to the point I was making earlier.

Unlike the information overload that our culture presently confuses with knowledge, the first and most important thing to realize about Wisdom is that it is *state-dependent*. That’s why it’s so easy to miss. On Eagle Island, certainly, we could have doubled the instructional time and hired out the cooking and chores. It would have been vastly more efficient. The only problem—at least if the road maps we were following are correct—is that none of the sacred alchemy would have taken place.

It could not have happened with our minds alone, any more than it could have happened through meditation alone or work alone. It required the whole of our beings, brought into balance by a time-tested formula drawn to very close tolerances. This is the first and indispensable principle of Wisdom. No cheating, no shortcuts are possible because, in the words of the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*, “How you get there is where you’ll arrive.”

Perhaps the best formal articulation of this basic principle is by the modern master of Christian Wisdom, Maurice Nicoll: “As one’s level of being increases, receptivity to higher meaning increases. As one’s being decreases, the old meanings return.”<sup>2</sup> While there are many ways of explicating this principle, perhaps the most graphic is through a Gospel story much favored by Wisdom teachers: the disciple Peter attempting to walk on the water. As the narrative unfolds in Matthew 14:22–33, the disciples are making a somewhat stormy late-night boat passage across the Sea of Galilee when they suddenly see Jesus walking toward them on the water. “Do not be afraid,” he tells them; “for it is I”—or as the biblical Greek literally reads, “for *I am*.”<sup>3</sup> Peter, always the impetuous one, plunges out of the boat and starts walking across the water toward his master. In the language of the tradition, he is under the sway of “gravitation from above,” his heart so pointedly fixed on Jesus that he rises briefly to Jesus’ level of being, a level of being at which the laws of the physical universe are transcended. He nearly makes it, too—but suddenly he feels the storm against his face, realizes that what he’s doing is impossible, and becomes frightened. And of course, at that moment he sinks.

It is a vivid metaphor, not only to help us grasp what level of being means but also against which to measure our contemporary shortfall. Does the idea of walking on water strike you as outrageous, simply another spiritual fiction? Few in our present culture, including the professedly religious, are still able to imagine that transcending the laws of the physical universe

is even possible, let alone the takeoff point at which the nature and destiny of a human being begin to come fully into their own. From that highwater mark in the unitive Wisdom of Christ, it seems as if the Christian West has suffered a steady diminution of both nerve and inner vision. The Church's gradual loss of a truly existential grasp of "gravitation from above" (implicit even in Peter's wavering and painfully obvious in the bitter doctrinal controversies of the third and fourth centuries) created a vicious circle whose consequences inevitably played themselves out in the wider culture. As Wisdom became more and more associated with intellectual understanding, more and more scholastic and cerebral, the capacity to read the ancient road maps of wholeness steadily declined. A fifteen-hundred-year slide reached its nadir in the much belittled but still benchmark maxim of Descartes: "I think, therefore I am." Being—that "*I am*" presence once so powerfully resonating from Christ astride the waters—has by this point become fully associated with the rational mind. In the Wisdom tradition, the name given to this state is *sleep*.

Fascinatingly, the wake-up call in our times has been sounded not so much in the Church as at the cutting edge of science. Quantum physics, most celebratedly in the Heisenberg principle,<sup>4</sup> but even more so in the complex mathematical equations of string theory (or M-theory, as it is now known), has come up against the objective limits of rational knowledge itself. Paul Davies, one of the most respected recent writers on physics and cosmology, makes this point very clearly in his book *The Mind*

*of God*. Tracing how all attempts to rationally explain the origins of the universe end in paradox, he argues that the apt conclusion may be not that the universe is meaningless but that we have identified meaning with rational explanation. “Might it not be the case that the reason for existence has no explanation in the usual sense?” he asks—and then answers himself with a remarkable observation: “This does not mean that the universe is absurd or meaningless. Only that an understanding of its existence and properties lies outside the usual categories of rational human thought.”<sup>5</sup> The challenge, as he sees it, is that we must regain what he calls a “mystical” way of knowing. The rational mind by itself can see no more than an assortment of random and self-canceling parts. “The One,” he feels—the underlying coherence beneath the surface chaos—“can only be known through a flash of mystical vision.”<sup>6</sup>

Davies makes the usual mistake here of confusing mysticism with Wisdom (an understandable error since Wisdom is a virtually unknown category in Western intellectual thought). What he is really describing is not “mystical” vision—which is typically spontaneous, ecstatic, and ineffable—but a *lucid and objective* way of seeing that is ultimately visionary. We might call it a “science of the imagination” that has been precisely developed and handed down from generation to generation within the Wisdom tradition. We will be exploring its insights in due course.

Overall, however, Davies’s point is right on target and clearly heralds the direction in which the Western mind must



travel toward a renewed sense of dignity and coherence. If the postmodern universe so often seems random and meaningless; if the once great American dream of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” seems so often nowadays to have shrunk to a bizarre caricature of itself—“The one with the most toys when he dies wins,” as a popular bumper sticker mordantly proclaims—perhaps the problem is not that our vision has grown too small but that we are using too little of ourselves to see.

“We are knee-deep in a river, searching for water,” writes Kabir Helminski, a contemporary Wisdom teacher in the Sufi lineage, using a vivid image to capture the irony of our contemporary plight.<sup>7</sup> The sacred road maps of wholeness still exist in the cosmos. There is a vision large enough to contain not only our minds but also our hearts and souls; an understanding of our place in the divine cosmology large enough to order and unify our lives and our planet. These truths are not esoteric or occult in the usual sense of the terms; they are not hidden from sight. In the Christian West they are strewn liberally throughout the entire sacred tradition: in the Bible, the liturgy, the hymnody and chants, the iconography. But to read the clues, it is first necessary to bring the heart and mind and body into balance, to awaken. Then the One can be known—not in a flash of mystical vision but in the clarity of unitive seeing.

In a small way, that’s what we were up to on Eagle Island. As our bodies and minds and hearts were prepared and integrated, using the ancient tools of Wisdom, we discovered once again just how precious these tools really are. Mindful work,

sacred chanting, meditation, prayer, and above all an intentional rhythm and balance to the day: these are not just activities; they are gateways of perception—*floodgates* of perception, in fact. Slowly at first and then with deeper and steadier force, we were swept into the river of divine compassion, not knowing where we were going but only that we were going there in oneness with each other and with the heart of all humanity. Beneath the shattered surface of the world, it became briefly possible to see—not just deduce, but actually *see*—how tenderly all things are being held in love.

Such seeing is costly. Many tears were shed that week in the process of moving toward this oneness of heart. For as Lyubov Adreyevna, the old dowager in Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard*, poignantly observes in the quotation with which this chapter began, the questions of the world have to hurt you before anything real can begin. That is the other precondition of a Wisdom way of knowing: it requires the whole of one's being and is ultimately attained only through the yielding of one's whole being into the intimacy of knowing and being known. Small wonder that for the ancient Israelites, the word used for this kind of Wisdom knowing—*da'ath*—is the same word as for “knowing” a partner in sexual intercourse. It doesn't happen apart from complete vulnerability and self-giving. But the divine Lover is absolutely real, and for those willing to bear the wounds of intimacy, the knowledge of that underlying coherence—“in which all things hold together”—is both possible and inevitable.