

## Seeking Wisdom

An excerpt from *The Hand That Rocks the World*, by David Shackleton

[“We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.”](#) – [Marcel Proust](#) (1871 - 1922)

“We could never learn to be brave and patient if there were only joy in the world” – [Helen Keller](#)

“The gift of willingness is the only thing that stands between the quiet desperation of a disingenuous life and the actualization of unexpressed potential.” – [Jim McDonald](#)

“It may actually be more healthy to be disturbed, confused, or searching than confident, certain, and secure.” – [Mark Scandrette](#)

[“Any transition serious enough to alter your definition of self will require not just small adjustments in your way of living and thinking but a full-on metamorphosis.”](#) – [Martha Beck](#)

“No price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.” – Friedrich Nietzsche

“Know well what leads you forward and what holds you back, and choose the path that leads to wisdom.” – Buddha

We have seen that wisdom is dualistic balance, and we have looked at how imbalance produces distorted perceptions and poor life decisions. How, then, does one move towards balanced wisdom?

In this chapter I will present a map of the journey through dualistic imbalance to personal wisdom, and discuss the nature of the terrain that one travels on that journey, what it looks and feels like. I will examine the attractions of imbalance, including addiction, a particularly compulsive form of imbalance. Finally, I will present a method of self-assessment for determining one's stage of development towards wisdom for any issue or area of one's life.

The content of people's lives varies greatly; different circumstances, different experiences, different beliefs, different attitudes. If a map or model of the journey of life is going to serve and fit them all, it must focus at a deeper level than that surface complexity, it must identify a single, simple underlying process that is common to everyone and that is basic to the experience of being human. That common underlying process is the creation of meaning.

Meaning is not intrinsic, it is our own creation. We saw in chapter two in the story about the person who received a cell phone call about their daughter's accident that the meaning you give to someone's behavior is your own construction or interpretation – it can alter without any change in the facts or the experience. The meaning that we give to everything in life, what it means that we live and then die, that there is suffering, that life is capricious – these are all our own creation. Often we accept meanings from the culture or from human subgroups (e.g., religions), but it is our choice which sets of prepackaged meanings we believe. In the past I have used the word 'spirituality' to describe this process, and I have offered the definition, “Spirituality is the process of creating and maintaining life meaning,” but this word is troublesome for some people. If you bear in mind that I am not in any way referring to religion or talking about God or the divine, then perhaps we can employ the word to mean something like “deep psychology”.

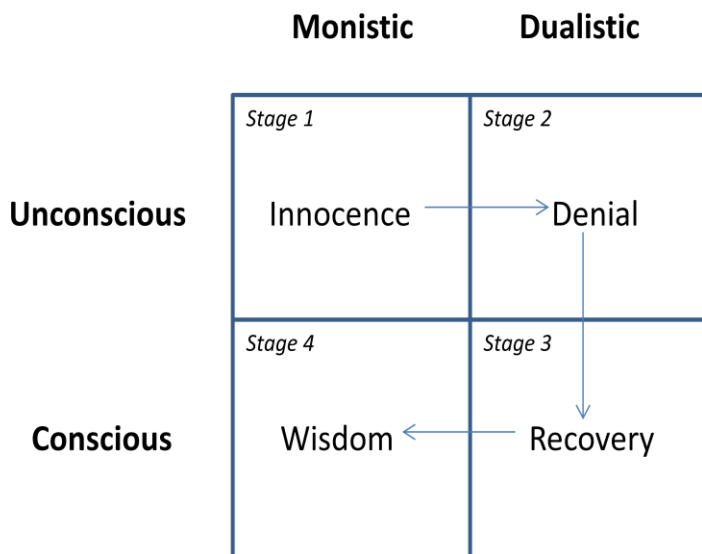
However, we have not got to simplicity yet – the meanings that people give to life also vary greatly. It turns out, though, that there are basic structural patterns that are common to everyone. One is now familiar to us – whether the meaning structure is dualistic or not. If we organize our world around good and bad; men/women/Jews/Blacks/Whites/Muslims/etc. are good, or are bad, that is a dualistic meaning

structure. In fact, most of the “isms” are dualistic. Feeling like a victim in your life is dualistic; feeling responsible for everything is the opposite side of the same duality. So one basic meaning structure is whether you see yourself and the world dualistically or not.

So far, we have spoken only of dualistic balance or imbalance. But what happens when we *are* dualistically balanced, when we see and value both sides equally? What happens is that the duality disappears; we see it as just two aspects of the same substance. When we see that men and women are truly equal, then the whole issue of better/worse, right/wrong, guilty/innocent stops being relevant. They are just different kinds of people where the differences don’t matter, don’t alter their basic status. The name for this unity of substance, this “opposite” of dualism is monism. We discussed in chapter four that the deep reality of the universe is that it is of one substance, like the can of beans that nevertheless shows up as dualistic when abbreviated into two dimensions. Dualism, then, is abbreviated perception, but deep reality is monistic.

So monism/dualism is one deep, fundamental pattern of meaning creation. Another is conscious/unconscious, whether we are creating and maintaining meaning by a conscious process of observation and learning, or by an unconscious process based (usually) on avoiding what we fear.

I developed the map of personal growth towards wisdom by plotting these two dimensions of meaning creation against each other.



*The four stage path to wisdom.*

We are born into stage 1, unconscious monism. Monism is defined by *Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary* as “the view, common to various philosophical systems, which reduces all reality to a single principle or substance.” Psychologists tell us that infants have no sense of self-identity, no concept of boundaries between themselves and all that they perceive. They haven’t yet put themselves, as a separate entity, into their picture of the world. Indeed, they do not yet possess a concept of “self” at all. Their world is all of one substance, undifferentiated. And stage 1 is *unconscious* monism because the infant is not aware of its own process of meaning construction, is not the intentional author of that developmental task. Rather, in a similarly unmanaged fashion to that by which we learn language, the complex set of

meanings associated with life (what boys and girls *do*, what adults are for) are assembled out of what we see going on around us.

At some point, a major transition happens; we form a 'self' and begin to spend some of our time in stage 2. Unfortunately this great, first act of self creation will always be a result of psychic distress.<sup>1</sup> No matter how loving the parents, they cannot anticipate or relieve all pains. Fear, hunger, physical discomforts are all a part of our experience as an infant, and our inability to control pain, to turn off distress simply because we don't like it, speaks loudly in our psyches. We suffer as infants, and our suffering does not answer to our will. Moreover, we are weak and powerless, unable to control anything that happens to us, and we are surrounded by people who are powerful, who can move around and who have complete power over us. Thus we conclude, as the basic act of self-creation, that there is something wrong with us. How else is an infant psyche to account for the horrible, intimate, irresistible facts of suffering and powerlessness? And since the folk around us are powerful and aren't suffering (we know this because we don't feel their pain), then *whatever is wrong with us makes us inferior to them. We are not an OK person, we are flawed and inferior.*

Note what has happened here. It is profound. In order to make sense out of suffering and powerlessness, in order to give meaning to a world that includes pain and impotence, the infant psyche has created a dualistic moral system out of nothing at all! It is an act of pure meaning creation, and on it will be built the massive dualistic moral edifice of good/bad, right/wrong, guilty/innocent, victim/perpetrator, etc. that provides the foundational meaning structures in the psyches of virtually everyone alive today. We human beings disagree widely about the content, about *what* is right and what is wrong, but we don't disagree that this right/wrong dualistic picture is the right way to view the world. Yet it is an artifact of pure error, a manufactured idea that has no intrinsic or essential place in the world and that actually causes a great deal of suffering.

This conclusion that "I am inferior" is drawn even in the best of family circumstances. However, in a dysfunctional or abusive family, it is reinforced with implicit or explicit messages of 'not-OK-ness' directed toward the child, as parents and siblings try to reassure themselves that *they* are OK by making the child wrong.

The self that is created in this way is a (dualistically) divided self. The two parts are a deeper self that believes that it is not OK, and a surface self that is dedicated to denying that belief. 'I am inferior' is so painful a conclusion that it *must* be denied, which is why I call stage 2 of the model 'Denial'. It takes time to develop sufficient ego strength to tolerate the raw pain of the acceptance of inferiority, so we hide it below conscious awareness, and in its place we construct a system of meanings, an interpretation of the world and our place in it, that is carefully designed to reassure us of our worth. To deny our inferiority, we fill our dualistic world-view with content that proves our superiority. The pain of a belief that we are flawed is known as shame; as a defense against that shame, the surface self clothes itself in moral superiority, in righteousness.

Here lie the roots of all the one-upmanship ego games, all the 'us and them' moral classification systems in the world. Whether we choose to found our personal superiority on gender (men/women are better than women/men), race, politics, religion, social status, macho posturing, feminine beauty, a combination of all of the above, or whatever, will depend on the details of our life. We choose some way of grouping or classifying people, with ourselves categorically in the morally superior group, and we defend it vigorously against any suggestion that it is wrong. We *must* defend it; our very identity and self-worth

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<sup>1</sup> "... when someone steps on my foot, only I feel the pain. The basis of the self is not thought but suffering, which is the most fundamental of all feelings. While it suffers, not even a cat can doubt its unique and uninterchangeable self. In intense suffering the world disappears and each of us is alone with his self. Suffering is the university of egocentrism." – Milan Kundera, *Immortality*

depends on it. But, because at root we are defending against ourselves, against ever discovering that we believe we are not OK, our defense must be convoluted so that it fools us as well. *In stage 2, we sincerely believe our own cover story, and compulsively find ways to explain away every hint that it might be mistaken.*

This deep and universal fear that we are flawed was revealed in a classic experiment by Asch. <sup>ii</sup>

“In that experiment subjects were required to make the simple perceptual judgment of whether lines were the same or different lengths. They were confronted with the question in a group situation in which the other members of the group had already unanimously made their judgments in an erroneous way. Unknown to the subject, the other members of the group were confederates of the experimenter. The question was whether the real subject would contradict the clear evidence of his senses and go along with the group, or whether he would go along with his senses and differ from the group. Strikingly, most of the subjects – approximately three quarters – conformed.

“Scheff,<sup>iii</sup> analyzing this experiment, argues that the response which occasioned the conformity, a response felt, incidentally, both by those who conformed and those who did not, was shame: ‘the fear that they were suffering from a defect and that the study would disclose this defect.’” <sup>iv</sup>

Let me share a story to illustrate how this internal shame gets started and reinforced. Some years ago, on Christmas Eve, I went with family to a Toronto church. At one point in the service, young boys and girls are called up from the congregation into a group at the front and questioned about Christmas by a young woman with a microphone. She begins, “How do you feel?” A boy replies, “Fine.” On to the next child; “What about you, how do you feel?” “Fine.” This isn’t going where the woman wants. “It’s Christmas Eve,” she says. “Isn’t anyone excited?” A chorus of “Yes” and “I am.” The children are getting the drift now. “What are you excited about?” the woman asks. This time there is no response. Silence.

I know what they’re excited about, of course. These are children aged four to twelve. It’s Christmas Eve. What they are excited about is the gifts they are expecting to receive tomorrow morning. But not one of them says so. Why not? Well, they know that although the questions seem to be asking about their feelings, about their truth, that’s not what’s really wanted. They know, at some level, that they are expected to perform, to pretend to be other than they are; that our approval of them depends on it. They are waiting for more direction so they can figure out the right answers.

The woman gives them a hint. “What’s special about Christmas? What’s Christmas about?” An older child thinks she knows the answer. “Compassion,” she says. The young woman with the microphone is visibly relieved. “That’s right,” she says. “And what is compassion?”

The conversation continues; I look around the church. I am looking to see if anyone other than me is disturbed by this. Among 200 parishioners I see only smiles of pleasure; parents and other adults enjoying the cuteness of the children. Perhaps they are telling themselves how wonderful children are, how much they love them. I experience a profound loneliness and despair. For I know that what I am witnessing is child abuse, in church, by good, honest, upright folk. And I fear that I am the only one who sees it.

Let’s look carefully at what was going on. We adults in that church, and I include myself since I did not challenge it, were seeking to have the children say the ‘right,’ virtuous things about Christmas; that it is about love and giving and compassion and selflessness. Perhaps we wanted to hear these things from the innocent mouths of our children so that we could be reassured in our pious belief that those are the important virtues. We wanted the children to be ‘excited’ about those virtues – perhaps because we weren’t very excited about them ourselves any more. I don’t know. But I do know this. We were using the children as objects for our own selfish purposes. We didn’t care to hear their real feelings, but only the ones we wanted from them. What’s worse, we wanted them to fake it for us, to pretend that what they

gave us *were* their real feelings. The stick with which we coerced these lies was our conditional approval. And of course it worked, as it usually does.

I looked at their faces as the children walked back to their seats. Some were excited, presumably at having spoken over the microphone. Some were subdued. None looked angry. What had happened was unremarkable; it happens every day, a hundred times a day, to every child and to every adult. It's our way of life. It's completely and totally normal. And it's utterly abusive. I don't know how to express my horror at the universality and the destructiveness of this subtle form of abuse and our almost total blindness to it. We have taught children to be ashamed of who they really are, and to substitute instead a false self for our approval. This deep, essential shame is what I call the shame wound.

These archetypally feminine (not female) forms of child abuse are hard to recognize. They are covert, indirect, manipulative and deceptive; the cover-up is built into the crime. To make it even more difficult, we have little empathy for this form of suffering, because we are all caught up in it ourselves. When it was done to us as children under the guise of righteousness, we hid our pain from ourselves. Now, still hiding and in denial of our pain, we fail to recognize the abusiveness of these forms of manipulation and control of others. Failing to recognize them, we perpetuate them.

We injure our children this way. We undermine their natural pride and authenticity, and leave shame and insecurity, a false self in its place. It isn't done maliciously, in anger or cruelty, but rather covertly, hidden from our awareness and theirs as well. It is done unconsciously, under a cover story that it is all for their own good. Nevertheless, the children's behavior proved that they knew, at some level, that who they really were wasn't valued, wasn't loved. The fact that they, like we, hid that knowledge from themselves doesn't make it less harmful, less abusive. On the contrary, by forcing self-deception on top of the manipulation, it makes it worse, more convoluted, more difficult to recognize. We get trapped into the conspiracy of the cover up, all of us pretending that what we are doing is loving. Is it any wonder that stage 2 is so difficult to find our way out of?

The majority of people in the world spend most of their lives in stage 2. It is a stage of *spiritual* development because it is defined by the way that we construct *meaning* in our lives. It is an *unconscious* stage because we remain unaware of the real purpose of this activity – the meanings that we *are* aware of are fake, untrue, are actually a cover story. It is dualistic because we have constructed two camps, the OK and the not-OK, with us (according to our cover story) solidly and demonstrably in the 'good' camp. Our spiritual (i.e., meaning-maintaining) life is dedicated to a defense against the truth, which we are sure will convict us, and so we live in fear and anxiety, which we interpret as coming from 'out there' since *we* are just and righteous, at least in the ways that *matter*. We thus cast ourselves as victims, since we are not responsible for the suffering we are enduring; it is all the fault of those unrighteous 'others.'

The experience of victimhood is characteristic of this stage. If we can find a way to establish the good guys as morally superior and righteous by definition, as a matter of identity (e.g., whites for a white person who chooses racism as a defense mechanism, or women for a feminist), so much the better for ensuring that our goodness is unassailable, is beyond challenge.

Here lies the genesis of almost all war, most crime and violence, most seeking for power and control and status, almost all of the social ills of our world. What is worse, virtually everything done to address these problems is done from within stage 2, and so does not actually improve things. For instance, suppose that a stage 2 man is telling a sexist joke, in order to reinforce his belief that as a man he is superior to women (which is itself a defense against his unconscious fear that he is inferior to women). Then shaming him for his sexism, (i.e., reversing the duality on him by implying that he is inferior to us because he is sexist) may make us feel superior and thus reinforce our own defenses, but is in fact ( i.e., in its essential *meaning*) no different than the behavior we were criticizing. For the sexist man, it attacks him by asserting what he unconsciously fears – his inferiority – so that he is more afraid and wounded than before, and more desperately needs to find ways to convince himself of and demonstrate his superiority.

Similarly, in the story we encountered in chapter three about the racist woman on the airplane, the actions of the stewardess and the applauding passengers all came from stage 2, making the white woman morally inferior. In this way, all interactions that flow out of stage 2 beliefs are win/lose zero-sum games that don't significantly move people towards health or maturity, and don't actually solve the problems that they ostensibly address. How could they; they aren't actually aimed at those problems at all, but are really attempts to prove one's own righteousness or worthiness under a purported but sincerely believed guise of doing good or improving the world. Stage 2 is a place of continuous, usually repressed anxiety and constant self-deception. It is truly an awful place to live.

A personal story from my adolescence, when I was still living my life entirely from within stage 2, may give a sense of how our shame operates to distort our lives. It was December, 1972, and I was 19 years old. There was a fruit pie sitting on the front seat of the car I was driving — my parents' car. The pie was a gift from Mum and Dad, for my lunch. It was late spring in New Zealand, a fine day, and I was hungry. I wanted to take a bite from the pie. While driving through the downtown core of Lower Hutt, my home town, I eased the pie out of its paper bag and crumpled the bag into a ball. I opened the driver's side quarter-light window and tried to push the paper ball out of the car. My attention shifted from the road to the window. Suddenly the car rocked: I had left the road and mounted the curb! I swung the wheel wildly to return to the road, but wham! My head hit the roof and the car stopped dead, its front pushed in over a foot by a lamp post that I hadn't even seen.

What a disaster! My parent's car was badly damaged (it was later written off), and it was entirely my fault. I felt intensely ashamed, completely stupid and unworthy. I had no ability to accept more of these feelings about myself; I had to find an excuse, a mitigating circumstance, a culprit. I had to divert some of the soul-destroying shame that I was pouring at myself in a torrent. But how to do it; there was no one but me involved. My parents' car was wrecked, I possibly injured, but my shame demanded my attention and overwhelmed all other considerations.

I crossed the road to a restaurant where I called my parents. My father answered the phone. I told him about the accident. He was calm and asked the right questions: "Is anyone hurt? Is the lamp post damaged?" I lied about what happened. I said that the fruit pie began to slip off the front seat, and I grabbed for it by reflex, and that was how I ran the car off the road. The lie seemed to assuage my shame a little — my unconscious reflexes, not my conscious littering and careless inattention, were to blame.

Back at the car, a passing police officer had stopped to check things out. I explained to him what had happened, including my lie about the falling pie. He peered into the car. The pie was in several pieces, mashed into the front parcel shelf — clearly it had been on the seat and not the floor when the car hit the post. I started to backfill and embroider my lie, explaining that I had managed to grab the pie and put it back on the seat. He looked at me and I could see he knew I was lying, but I saw him decide; 'What does it matter, there's nobody else involved, it's his fault no matter what story he tells.' He shrugged his shoulders and moved on to other things: insurance, towing details.

I concealed that shame-inspired lie from my parents for over twenty five years, until January, 1998 when I published a story about it and sent them a copy along with a letter apologizing to them for my deception. It was good for me to get it off my chest: part of one's stage 3 process involves making amends and apologizing for one's guilt. But, you might say, it wasn't entirely your fault; your shame was at least partly a result of your parents' treatment of you. Yes, of course, but that's stage 2 victim thinking. I had already spent all of that currency of holding myself blameless and holding others responsible, during my long stay in stage 2. Stage 3 is about searching for all the ways that one is guilty and responsible, and ignoring the (equally true) ways that one is blameless. Only then can the accounts be *balanced*, so that you get, in total, a true picture of personal responsibility. Inevitably, as we embrace and grieve our guilt, we discover its practical limits. Indeed, we discover eventually that the whole notion of our — or anyone's — guilt is entirely mistaken. Let such a discovery come naturally; if it is sought too early it will sabotage

the whole process as we use it to avoid the pain of guilt, to return to stage 2 and let ourselves off the hook again.

The spiritual journey is about growth; each stage has a purpose. The purpose of stage 2 is to insulate the psyche from unendurable pain behind the walls of denial, while it tries to grow the ego strength to move to the next stage, that of recovery. If sufficient strength can be achieved (many do not reach this point before their death intervenes), the birth into stage 3 can take place.

Birth is a good metaphor for what happens at this time. Expelled from the insulated, womb-like state of denial, the psyche begins to experience all the meanings that had been hidden. The pain of birth can be overwhelming. The grief of the repentant sinner, the remorse of the recovering alcoholic or drug addict, the guilt of the now contrite abuser or philanderer. Yet it is a glorious event. The newly aware soul courageously seeks a relationship of truth, of reality rather than of denial. Thus, as in physical childbirth, it is *conscious* for the first time. The pain that had been buried is acknowledged and felt. In stage 3 we accept our guilt and no longer hide from it. The pain of shame is experienced as a wound in the psyche (which it is), and is gradually recovered from through grief, which is the psychic process of letting go of parts of our identity construction. Yet this stage is still dualistic; the 'good' and 'bad' classifications remain. What has happened is that the old, false world view has been abandoned, and a new one, an attempt to find the true worth of one's soul and one's real place in the cosmos, has begun.

It takes time to undo a world view. The rationalizations of years of denial must be painstakingly deconstructed and the truth with which they will be replaced must be discovered. This process is like childhood. It is a time of learning and adventure and discovery, and also of pain and confusion. I first entered this stage at 7pm on December 6, 1988. My experience was one of new (in)sight – “I was blind, but now I see” – as I began to re-evaluate all of the meanings I had given to the world. My process of recovery, of discovering true and authentic rather than self-serving meaning, continues to this day.

Like all who have begun the conscious part of their spiritual journey, I started by embracing the shadow side of my supposed superiority, which is, of course, my supposed inferiority. It is painful work, and humbling, as we own our guilt and apologize to friends and family for our shortcomings, previously denied. Yet there is also joy in it, the joy of being truly alive, of *feeling* the pain rather than numbing it away with self-serving stories of blamelessness. The joy of ceasing to hide from our own soul, of healing the split in our psyche, previously divided into a light half which we could safely acknowledge and a shadow side which ruled us from the dark, unexamined depths of our unconscious. The joy of healing, of ‘whole-ing,’ of becoming integral and complete and emotionally uncrippled. The wondrous joy of seeing that, yes, there are answers, and they are comprehensible and accessible. The Universe is not hostile, judgmental or perversely enigmatic as we had believed, but clear, benign and understandable.

What of spiritual maturity? What of stage 4 – wisdom? Parts of me now spend time in that place, although other parts still live in other stages. The essence of the transition to stage 4 is to apprehend again what was lost when we moved out of stage 1, the mystical unity and perfection of the Universe, but this time with power and competence rather than in powerless innocence. As we balance the dualistic meanings we had constructed in stage 2 by exploring their opposite side, they become less structural in our psyches. As we integrate the opposites, we see that the dualism itself was a misperception; we begin to apprehend the deeper, non-dual reality. If there is good and bad, guilt and innocence on both sides, then what use is the good/bad split? Can you imagine letting go of duality, seeing that there is no right or wrong, no good or bad, but only stages that we pass through? Our wanting the world to be different from what it is, the violence to stop, or the wars, or the environmental destruction, is just an expression of our own need to have the world meet our expectations rather than expressing its own nature. It's like wanting a three-year-old to understand calculus. From the perspective of stage 4, that isn't wrong either. It's just a dualistic stage, an abbreviated world view that has its moment in our spiritual evolution.

The world is perfect; social immaturity is a phase, not a crime, and not a defect. A child of three is not less than an adult, but perfect as he or she is; lack of calculus knowledge is appropriate to that stage. All the wars, violence and suffering in the world are simply age-appropriate (more precisely, stage-appropriate) behavior. Easy to say and to understand intellectually; in stage 4 we *feel* it, we know and understand and accept it. We know that the world is perfect as it is, yet still there is a vital task for us. Life has a direction that we can assist or oppose. Children grow into adults, not to improve themselves or to fix something that is wrong, and not because it's better to be an adult, but simply because that is the nature and direction of life. Effective parents assist rather than oppose the process; they guide and support the maturation of their children. In the same way, the task of the spiritually mature is to assist the growth of others, not to make them better or to fix anything, for nothing is wrong, but just for the joy of being in harmony with the cycle of life, for the wonder of seeing the unfolding of the flower that is a human being or a human society or a living ecosystem.

That's what stage 4 is like – but how does one get there? We have to dismantle duality, to recognize that it is an illusion, an abbreviated perception of reality. When we are in stage 2 or 3, our perceptions are shaped by the dualistic meaning structures that we have built to divide the world into good and bad. Not only our thoughts, but our feelings too are entirely aligned with these divisions. What we have decided is wrong both *feels* wrong and is *thought* to be wrong. All of our ideas about why it is wrong are instantly available to us. In a word, we are prejudiced in favor of those ideas, classes, people, objects that we have classified as good or superior, and against those that we have defined as bad or inferior. To use a metaphor, we have trashed all the 'bad' ideas. The work of moving ourselves towards stage 4 is the work of rooting around in our psychic trash cans. It's dirty, disturbing, fearful and painful work. But it's worth remembering that all of that psychic trash is our own garbage. From the perspective of stage 4, duality, right and wrong, good and bad; none of these exist, other than as immature methods of meaning construction that we now see with compassion. So there is a kind of psychic economy, a coming full circle, involved in picking through our own trashed concepts and reintegrating our values. It is difficult work, but it is rewarding.

In stage 4 we have transcended duality, but before we transcend it we first have to balance it by living both sides of the duality.

I recommend this work to readers. In the questions of gender, prejudice and working for social change, we need to be clear thinkers and clear visionaries, to know that what we are working towards is indeed worth pursuing and that the personal and social changes we are seeking will genuinely improve matters. Picking through our own prejudice trash can is the only way of knowing this about our chosen strategy. We have the example of feminism to caution us about the risks of pursuing social change without looking deeply into our own motivations, without carefully examining both sides of an issue.

One aspect of stage 4 work is that it is usually misunderstood, just as children frequently mistake the motivations or vision of their parents. No matter; the spiritually mature have the soul-strength to do what is called for no matter what others think they see. Living and working in the same world as those whose lives are built around denial, they sometimes outrage or offend. In particular, they will at times confront denial and expose the pain behind it, injecting a momentary antidote to the tranquilizer and anesthetic that the denial provides. To those in denial, it seems that the pain was *caused* by the intervention, which is seen as violent, abusive or uncaring. That is why, earlier in this chapter, I was careful to say that *most* of the violence, *most* of the abuse in the world is stage 2 people acting out their control needs. Some of what is seen as evil and wrong is actually a projection of stage 2 judgments onto necessary spiritual surgery. Recall that sages and spiritual leaders throughout history have been the targets of hatred as well as love.

I want to emphasize that these stages are not phases that we pass through, never to return. I still spend time in the stage 2 space of judging others in order to feel morally superior, while hiding from myself the awareness that that is what I am doing. Then I often move to stage 3 and judge myself for doing so and



apologize for my error. I even return to stage 1 at times; the 'falling in love' experience of oneness with the lover, the self-indulgent high of a drug trip or glorying in a personal achievement are all forms of return to the lost innocence and joy of monistic stage 1. We move among the stages from moment to moment.

I described this model as a *map* of the spiritual journey. It is vital to remember that the map is not the territory. Having a map does not remove the need to make the journey, nor does it reduce the effort of traversing the terrain. However, a map does have two valuable uses. First, it gives a picture, a sense of the whole territory, the "lay of the land" as it were. We can gain an impression of what the whole journey looks like and might involve, and even make some plans about how to travel. Second, a map is useful for identifying where we are right now on our journey. Placing oneself on the map is not difficult. For whatever is on your mind right now (for instance, your relationship with your spouse, or your boss, or your child, or the state of the world or the environment), consider first whether you see it dualistically, in terms of things or issues or people that are right and wrong. If so, then you are definitely in stage 2 or 3 on this issue or relationship. If you see it dualistically, is it the other or others that you see as wrong? Then you are in stage 2. Or do you see yourself as the one who is wrong and needs to change? Then you are in stage 3. (Note, you can be in both stages at the one time, seeing both things 'out there' that are wrong, and also things about yourself that you judge to be wrong.)

I encourage you to use the map to plot your path to the next stage, wherever you find yourself. If you are in stage 2, imagine how it would feel to let go of the need to have others be wrong, and look at what you are doing to cause or maintain the situation you are judging to be bad. Turn the judgment onto yourself for projecting out your internal wounds. If you are in stage 3, consider whether you can let go of the need to see the situation in terms of right and wrong at all. Through grieving your woundedness, you can forgive yourself entirely for your guilt. From stage 4 you see it simply as a dance, as a stage of our evolution through life, and you will be content to dance it as well as you can.

I will relate a story from my own life which illustrates how the stages look and feel as one moves through them, for our authentic feelings can be a guide to what is going on in us, to what stage we are in. In August 1994 I began a six week, six hundred kilometer solo canoe trip down the Missinaibi River in northern Ontario, as a part of the process (I didn't realize this until later) of initiating myself into manhood. From the first day, I found myself reacting strongly to the presence of litter on the campsites. Now, I am used to litter in city streets, on roadside picnic areas, even in provincial parks. But this was remote wilderness, much of it reached only after days of paddling and portages, some over a mile long. I discovered that my expectations about wilderness campsites needed serious adjustment. "I can't believe it!" I raged. "These people carried full beer cans on their backs for miles, and now can't be bothered to carry out the empties, which weigh less than an ounce each. These folk came all this way to get *away* from civilization, to get into unspoiled wilderness. And here they are, *SPOILING* it!" I was *so* indignant, so righteous, so angrily superior. I felt the ugly pleasure of my rage, of my moral superiority to those cretins, those jerks. Not just men either, I saw with satisfaction; the area around the campsites was filled with carelessly discarded tampons and panty liners. I was really projecting my judgment. Pure stage 2. In my solitude, unconcerned about how I would be seen or how I might affect others, I let my feelings flow more freely than usual. As in an experiential workshop, the intensity of my emotions allowed them to do their work swiftly, and within a few days I found myself moving into another space.

I began to realize that my moral superiority was on fairly shaky ground if I wasn't doing anything about the litter that surrounded me. "If you're not part of the solution," I told myself, "you're part of the problem." I began getting up an hour earlier each day and picking up litter. If I arrived early at a campsite, I would do it before retiring. I burned combustibles in a campfire and collected the glass and cans in garbage bags. But I was still full of judgment, and I resented my actions. "I wouldn't have to be doing this," I raged, "spoiling my vacation with this shitty work, if it weren't for those inconsiderate louts, those self-centered party animals. They haven't even bothered to bury their own shit and toilet

paper!” Still stage 2, but with ‘good works’ added to bolster my superiority. I was now a politically correct wilderness camper, not only leaving the campsite as I found it, but cleaning up after others as well. I was morally unassailable, sure of my righteous superiority. But I wasn’t enjoying my trip. I wasn’t happy. These feelings: righteous anger, resentment, and unhappiness are characteristic of stage 2.

Over the next few days, something remarkable happened. I began to identify with the ‘louts’. I realized that I too had spread garbage around; I had just done it in different ways. In school, when ‘the lads’ got together and partied, I wasn’t invited. I wanted to be, but I was the nerd, the kid at the top of the class who liked to show how smart he was, and I was ostracized. I developed a compensating, ‘better than you’ attitude that was pure psychic garbage, and I spread it around. “But what if I *had* been ‘one of the lads’,” I asked myself for the first time. “Wouldn’t I have chucked my litter around just like they, to demonstrate my macho, who-gives-a-shit attitude, so necessary for acceptance?” Instead, from the rejection I fashioned the attitude of a rebel, bolstering my self-esteem by telling myself that I was better than that low-life rabble, the party crowd. My litter may have been psychic rather than literal; it was no less toxic.

I grieved my lost acceptance, the fact that I was not and could never return to be ‘one of the lads’. My daily litter pickup and my portaging of the growing weight of non-combustibles became a kind of penance, a balancing of the books, an atonement for the guilt of my unconsciousness. I had reversed the duality, previously in my favor, and now saw myself as guiltier than the litterers, rightfully employed in picking up the garbage. For the first time, I began to enjoy the work. I saw it as a gift, as helping to heal nature and the world through selfless service. My daily ritual became a metaphor for the kind of spiritual healing work I might do in the future. As I combed my fingers through the ashes of past campfires for lumps of glass or metal, I imagined I was combing through the psychic garbage of people’s lives, the trash left by them and by others, helping them to sort out what to keep and what to discard. In the dust and dirt of the campfire ashes I found a kind of purpose, a holy goal of restoration and healing of a wounded planet. It felt like worthy work, and I was proud to do it. I had moved into stage 3 of my journey with litter. These feelings: sorrow, sadness, humility – and some joy – are characteristic of stage 3.

I stayed in that space for two or three weeks. Toward the end of my trip, however, my attitude changed again. I realized, looking at the litter scattered through the trees around a campsite, that nature wasn’t hurt by this at all. Nature didn’t need me to help ‘heal’ her, she could process the litter her own way, and what did it matter whether it took two hours or two centuries? It was only my sense of aesthetics, of ‘rightness’ that was offended by the litter; nature was not offended. Nothing was wrong, and nothing needed healing. I became free to choose, without emotional attachment. I chose to continue my daily ritual of picking up the litter, only now it wasn’t a duty or a holy calling (I smiled at my arrogance) or even an improvement. It was just what I, an autonomous being, chose to do with my time. Neither good nor bad, neither worthy nor unworthy, no different in moral terms from the choice made by those who tossed the litter in the first place. That too was their free choice, and they were just as free as me. Now, I found myself able to really enjoy the litter ritual, for it was something I was doing for me, as an affirmation of my power of choice, of my spiritual freedom and autonomy. I was choosing to align myself with a direction that seemed harmonious with nature’s direction. In that time and for that task, I moved myself into adult spirituality, conscious monism, stage 4. The feelings of stage 4 are peace and joy.

I arrived at the end of my journey down the Missinaibi River at Moosonee, Ontario at the bottom of James Bay in October with an accumulation of sixty pounds of unburnable litter. As I dumped it into the town trash cans, it felt like the completion of a major process, a journey of intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth.

My map of the journey of spiritual growth, from stage 2 stuckness in righteous victimhood, through the grief and growth that comes from taking responsibility for one’s life in stage 3, recovery, to the

destination of dualistic balance in stage 4, wisdom, is a simple, rational description because that has been my life quest, to discover simple underlying structures and mechanisms to human psychology and society. For a more mythological perspective on the same process, read *The Maiden King; The Reunion of Masculine and Feminine*, by Robert Bly and Marion Woodman.<sup>v</sup> The book is their commentary on a Russian folk tale in which Ivan, a young man who neglected his betrothed, now must seek her at the end of the earth. It is a story of seeking wisdom through descent, through trial and trouble, which is the way that it must be sought. At one point Ivan encounters Baba Yaga, a fierce old wise woman, who asks him, “Are you here by your own free will or by compulsion?” If he answers that he comes by free will, she will eat him. If he answers that he is compelled, she will eat him. In other words, if he remains stuck on either side of the duality, he dies.

This is a wise and powerful message, for stage 2 is indeed a kind of death. There is no change, no growth, no wisdom, no reality there; only illusion ossified into one-sided dogmatism. But Ivan has grown through his journey, and he answers, “Largely of my own free will, and twice as much by compulsion.” His answer is both dualistically balanced – and also irreverently irrational. He has learned that wisdom transcends rationality, and the witch lets him live.

Let us summarize what we have covered in this chapter. The development of an individual or a society towards wisdom is fundamentally about the evolution of life meaning. This evolution can be modeled in four stages, by plotting the dimension of monism/dualism against the dimension of unconscious/conscious meaning structures. Dualism, seeing things as good or bad, right or wrong, is characteristic of stages 2 and 3, while stage 4, wisdom, is the experience of conscious non-dualism which is achieved by integrating both sides of many dualistic opposites.

This chapter has focused primarily on how an individual grows towards wisdom. But what of a society, a culture? The next chapter will consider where we are, primarily in North America, on the path towards wisdom, and how individuals can assist the process of collective maturation.

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i *The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*, Canadian Edition, , Lexicon, NY, 1988, p.645.

ii Solomon Asch, “Studies of Independence and Conformity: I. A Minority of One against a Unanimous Majority,” *Psychological Monographs*, 70, 1956, pp.1-70.

iii Thomas J. Scheff, *Microsociology: Discourse, Emotion and Social Structure*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1990.

iv Howard S. Schwartz, *The Revolt of the Primitive: An Inquiry into the Roots of Political Correctness*, Praeger, Westport, CONN, 2001, pp.155-6.

v Robert Bly and Marion Woodman, *The Maiden King; The Reunion of Masculine and Feminine*, Henry Holt & Co, NY, 1998.