Wisdom and the Second Enlightenment

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Humanity faces a number of significant challenges in this time of great transformational change.[1] A belief among many observers and analysts of our contemporary world is that a new way of thinking, which includes an enhanced capacity for future consciousness, is necessary to successfully meet these challenges. Some foresee the emergence of a New Enlightenment.[2]

As one prime example, Walter Truett Anderson, in *The Next Enlightenment: Integrating East and West in a New Vision of Human Evolution*, sees a new and globally pervasive enlightenment as the next cognitive stage in evolutionary development of the human species. He suggests that enlightenment may not be a state reserved for a privileged few, but actually may be a direction toward which the entire species is heading. In the past there have been "enlightened ones" who attempted to communicate their discoveries to others, and over the centuries, as Anderson recounts, there has been a series of enlightenment movements that offered liberation, transcendence, and more advanced modes of experience and cognition. But this may simply be a prelude to a more general evolutionary advance for all humanity.[3]

Anderson believes that the main cause of contemporary social problems is excessive self-centeredness and that enlightenment has as one of its central distinctive features the overcoming of ego-centricity. He describes enlightenment as an expansion of consciousness – a liberation from mental constraints. He sees it as involving the experience of "oneness" and connectedness, where the conceptualized boundary between the self and the world is transcended. As he notes, the boundary of self and other is frequently a protective and defensive posture, as a way to preserve stasis and prevent change within; enlightenment is the overcoming of this ego-defensive state. Enlightenment is a form of transcendence – of the capacity to stand back from everyday experience and gain a broader view of things.

Evolution is perhaps the central theme in *The Next Enlightenment* for Anderson thinks that enlightenment is "an evolutionary project" – an expression of the dynamic and growth-oriented dimension of reality. And a key element in the state of enlightenment is seeing that all is flow – that all being is becoming.

Along similar thematic lines, the call for a New Enlightenment and a new way of thinking is clearly at the center of Rick Smyre's ideas and his spearheading what he refers to as the "Second Enlightenment" movement. Smyre has identified a fundamental set of new principles of thinking for the Second Enlightenment that could move humanity toward an Integral Culture. Inspired by the work of Sally Goerner, among others, according to Smyre, the new dynamic and holistic ideas of ecological science provide the basis for this new way of thinking and dealing with our contemporary problems and challenges.[4] Contrasting Second Enlightenment principles with themes associated with the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, it is worth

noting that at least seven of the twelve principles revolve around the themes of connectedness, interdependence, and holism, whereas the first European Enlightenment emphasized the opposite themes of autonomy, independence, and linearity. Further, several principles identified with the Second Enlightenment highlight the themes of mystery, uncertainty, change, and transformation.[5] It is important to note the resonance between Anderson and Smyre on the themes of wholeness/connectedness and evolution/change in describing their respective concepts of enlightenment.

Coupled together with writing on the Second Enlightenment, Smyre has attempted to spread the word in other ways and put these ideas into action. He first heard the expression "the Second Enlightenment" in a presentation he attended on a visit to Scotland in 1999 – a quite appropriate place to first encounter this term since Scotland was one of the key centers in the creation of the first European Enlightenment. In the presentation at St. Andrews University, the recommendation was made for Scotland "to do things differently in the future to be a vital and sustainable society." The term "struck a cord" with Smyre – a new conceptual framework for human society was needed to move beyond the ideas and modes of operation of the Industrial Age. Over the next few years, Smyre dialogued with others, attempting to clarify the philosophy of a Second Enlightenment and put its principles into action in the form of different organizational collaborations. Out of these dialogues grew the Second Enlightenment Project, which consists of two key components: the planning and development of a Second Enlightenment conference and the creation of a global network of Second Enlightenment Clubs.[6]

The Second Enlightenment Clubs are community focused and action oriented. Smyre envisions small local groups of individuals coming together who are interested in creating "futures generative dialogues." These groups would be provided with initial reading material on Second Enlightenment principles and begin by discussing major trends in the world and the impact of these trends on their local community. From this analysis and assessment, groups would attempt to apply principles of transformational change (Second Enlightenment concepts) to local challenges and future goals. Finally, such clubs would network and share ideas with other clubs.[7]

After several years of planning, the Second Enlightenment conference was held in Columbia, South Carolina March 4th through 6th, 2007.[8] It was co-sponsored by Smyre's *Center for Communities of the Future* (COFT) and the *Columbia World Affairs Council*. Following from Second Enlightenment principles, the conference was structured to be highly interactive and participatory, with a focus on dealing with concrete issues and problems within a "futures context." In this regard, one unique feature of the conference was that instead of the traditional agenda with a scheduled series of presentations that conference participants could select from to attend, at the beginning of the conference participants needed to identify one among a set of "futures dialogues" that they would exclusively attend over a two-day period. Participants in a given dialogue would have the opportunity to get to know each other, sharing their interests and backgrounds. They would not simply sit and listen to a presenter,

2

but would engage in substantial group discussion around a given topic with the intent of coming to some set of core conclusions and perhaps even an action plan. At the end of the two-day period the different groups would report back to the entire conference on what key ideas emerged in their respective dialogues.

The topics covered in the futures dialogues ranged across the full gamut of contemporary issues and concerns. Included were facilitating philosophical and critical thinking in very young children (accompanied by an amazing film showing 5 and 6 year olds discussing the mind-body problem); the local neighborhood as a change agent; arts, creativity, and multimedia; "uplearning"; spirituality and finding meaning in life; becoming an economic developer in a connected world; 21st Century citizenship; broadband and community transformation; women and minority owned businesses; global warming; public health; the homeless; and developing alternative sources of energy beyond petroleum. Overall, the emphasis was to find creative ways to think about fundamental issues, come up with strategies for implementing these novel ideas, and sharing and networking among the different dialogue groups.

I facilitated one of the futures dialogues groups. My topic was "Wisdom and Heightened Future Consciousness." My opening hypothesis was that the core capacity underlying the Second Enlightenment is the virtue of wisdom. That is, what Smyre and others describe as the central qualities of the New Enlightenment form the essence of wisdom. Though the study and pursuit of wisdom has a long tradition, there has been significant recent work and rethinking on the topic, and a new and re-energized understanding of wisdom has emerged informed by recent advances in psychology, education, philosophy, and science. I reviewed a variety of these new ideas on wisdom. I provided participants a short paper describing the qualities of wisdom, connecting my ideas with Second Enlightenment principles, and wrote out a series of questions regarding how wisdom could be applied to individual and community challenges and concerns. Some of the questions I posed were:

- How would we transform our educational system to facilitate the development of deep learning, critical thinking, future consciousness, and wisdom in our students?
- Can we imagine a local culture or community of wisdom and enlightenment? Can we visualize what such a culture and community would be like? How would we work toward achieving such a reality in the future?
- Since wisdom is a virtue, connected with many other key virtues such as courage, humility, and honesty, could you imagine leading a more virtuous life in the future? How would this transformation benefit you, significant others, and your community? How would you help yourself and others become more virtuous, especially in regards to those virtues connected with wisdom?

At the beginning of the workshop I asked participants to identify what they believed were the key challenges facing humanity today. I started from this point because a basic argument, as noted above, is that the challenges facing the world today require a new mindset and way of thinking. Hence, what are the

challenges? And then, how would wisdom appropriately address such challenges? There were many different answers to the opening question including a general lack of effective communication among humanity, a disconnection from nature, including our own biological nature, an inability to act on future possibilities, the lack of an inspiring mythology and credible unifying story, "everything is a mess", and interestingly, in resonance with Anderson's argument, excessive ego-mindedness and separateness among us.

In the next step in the workshop, when I asked participants to describe their ideas on the nature of wisdom, it was quite amazing to hear how enthusiastic, rich, and thoughtful their responses were to this question. Everyone had ideas on the nature of wisdom, and everyone saw how provocative and valuable it was to consider this concept. Some of the responses were that wisdom was being perceptive and receptive, asking the right questions, deep and self-aware inquiry, integration and awareness, listening with heart, mind, and body, being embodied in the world, having balance and perspective, resonance with the whole, integrating the past and future with the present, being in the zone, responsibility, openness to mystery, acting out of love rather than fear, and finding meaning in life. It is noteworthy that participants' ideas on wisdom over-lapped significantly with Anderson's ideas on enlightenment and Smyre's principles of the Second Enlightenment; the concepts of wisdom and enlightenment clearly appear connected, at least based on this sample. Not that there weren't some significant disagreements among participants regarding how to define wisdom or what were its most important qualities, but when all the different pieces were put together, the collective wisdom of the participants on the nature of wisdom corresponded significantly with the set of qualities I have listed as essential to this human virtue.[9] My definition of wisdom highlighted that it is a dynamic and growing capacity, involving expansive and integrative consciousness, both an emotional and ethical dimension, and that it is practical knowledge used to benefit oneself and others. All told, many of the participants stated that they believed that the virtue of wisdom provided an excellent guiding principle and ideal for approaching the future.

During the remaining time in the workshop, we discussed the problems and challenges facing individual participants in their own lives and how the pursuit of wisdom could provide guidance and help in meeting these challenges and problems. It is noteworthy that at this point in the workshop the discussion closely resembled a group therapy session – participants explaining personal problems and the group providing analysis and suggestions for the future. In reviewing the contemporary literature on wisdom, it seems clear that there is a correlation between wisdom and both happiness and mental health.[10] (Similarly, the promise of enlightenment is to bring greater inner peace and satisfaction with life.) Perhaps a way to look at the troublesome and challenging state of affairs in the world today – for example, the high levels of stress, drug abuse, interpersonal fragmentation, and depression in industrialized countries – is from a psychological perspective; our practical problems are due to psycho-social problems, and the "cure" is to become more psychologically healthy. To make a connection with a key theme in Smyre's conception of the Second

Enlightenment, cognitive therapists emphasize that life can improve by a person changing how he or she thinks. The ideas we discussed in the workshop regarding the nature of wisdom provided an outline for how to think differently about life and the world around us in a way that created more happiness, self-fulfillment, and better relations with others. The pursuit of wisdom is the pursuit of mental health.

Overall, it was quite educational for me to facilitate an extended participatory workshop on wisdom; over the last few years I have given various presentations on wisdom and led several structured workshops, but this two-day dialogue was much more open and free-flowing then any of my previous experiences. Many of the participants came away from the experience enlivened and inspired and expressed gratitude for a highly stimulating workshop. How the workshop will impact their lives remains to be seen. This is a goal I continue to work on – finding ways to translate ideas on wisdom into action and life transformation.

In a follow-up report on the Second Enlightenment conference, Rick Smyre states that the conference was more successful than he expected. Comments from the participants were very positive: "an amazing experience", "first-class", "one of the best", "learned a lot", and "future inspiring event." According to him, many new collaborative groups among participants were formed (the beginnings of Second Enlightenment Clubs), as well as new collaborative connections between the Second Enlightenment group and already existing organizations and projects. A Second Enlightenment section in the virtual reality world of Second Life is being developed. Overall, the conference furthered the COTF Center's general goals of networking people and sharing ideas on how to apply transformational principles to improving human society.

Perhaps as Anderson suggests humanity is evolving toward a species wide enlightenment – a global transformation in consciousness and mode of thinking. Specific efforts to stimulate and guide the emergence of novel mindsets, new ways of thinking and relating to the world, and the pursuit and cultivation of a re-energized and reformulated conception of wisdom may be manifestations or expressions of this general trend. We are riding the wave. As Smyre hopes for, networks of Second Enlightenment Clubs, given some initial impetus, may spontaneously arise across the globe, connecting with others interested in ushering in a new age. Similar groups, with resonant philosophies and modes of thinking, also may emerge (and undoubtedly already are), in response to finding a new way to think and live to resolve or transcend the contemporary problems and difficulties facing humanity. Of special note, harkening back to the title of Anderson's book, it is critical to integrate the modes of knowing and being of both the East and the West. At the Second Enlightenment conference, discussion tended to focus on Western thinking, both old and new, but if one looks at the principles of the Second Enlightenment, as formulated by Smyre, there is a great deal of similarity with the holistic and dynamic ideas about reality found in the East.[11] A truly global New Enlightenment must synthesize and build upon the multiple modes of knowing of the East and the West, and this, in fact, as I have

proposed, is one of the key qualities of a new vision of wisdom for our contemporary world.[12]

[1] Christian, David *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004, Chapters 14, 15; Glenn, Jerome and Gordon, Theodore *2005 State of the Future*. American Council for the United Nations University, 2005.

[2] Smyre, Rick "Futures Generative Dialogue for 2nd Enlightenment Clubs" in Communities of the Future - http://www.communitiesofthefuture.org/; Goerner, Sally *After the Clockwork Universe: The Emerging Science and Culture of Integral Society*. Norwich, Great Britain: Floris Books, 1999; Hubbard, Barbara Marx *Conscious Evolution: Awakening the Power of Our Social Potential*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 1998; Lombardo, Thomas *Contemporary Futurist Thought: Science Fiction, Future Studies, and Theories and Visions of the Future in the Last Century*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2006, Pages 383-409.

[3] Anderson, Walter Truett *The Next Enlightenment: Integrating East and West in a New Vision of Human Evolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.

[4] Goerner, Sally "Creativity, Consciousness, and the Building of an Integral Society" in Loye, David (Ed.) *The Great Adventure: Toward a Fully Human Theory of Evolution*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2004.

[5] Smyre, Rick "Futures Generative Dialogue for 2nd Enlightenment Clubs" in Communities of the Future - http://www.communitiesofthefuture.org/

[6] How the Second Enlightenment Concept Emerged - http://www.2enlightenment.com/story.htm; Futures Generative Dialogue for 2nd Enlightenment Clubs - http://communitiesofthefuture.org/articles/2nd%20enlightenment%20clubs.html.

[7] About Second Enlightenment Clubs - http://www.2enlightenment.com/clubs.htm .

[8] The Second Enlightenment Conference - http://www.2enlightenment.com/ .

[9] Lombardo, Thomas "The Pursuit of Wisdom and the Future of Education" *Creating Global Strategies for Humanity's Future.* Mack, Timothy C. (Ed.) World Future Society, Bethesda, Maryland, 2006b.

[10] Sternberg, Robert (Ed.) *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Macdonald, Copthorne *Toward Wisdom: Finding Our Way Toward Inner Peace, Love, and Happiness*. Charlottesville, Virginia: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 1996; Macdonald, Copthorne *Matters of Consequence: Creating a Meaningful Life and a World that Works*. Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada: Big Ideas Press, 2004; The Wisdom Page - http://www.cop.com/.

[11] Nisbett, Richard *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently …and Why*. New York: The Free Press, 2003.

[12] Lombardo, Thomas, 2006b.