

Is There a Perennial Wisdom?

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Readings

from the *Bhagavad Gita*:

I will speak to you now
of that great Truth which you ought to know,
since by its means you will win immortal bliss;
That which is without beginning,
the Eternal Spirit which dwells in Me,
neither with form nor yet without it.
Everywhere are Its hands and Its feet,
everywhere It has eyes that see, heads that think,
and mouths that speak;
everywhere It listens; It dwells in all the worlds;
It envelops them all.
Beyond the senses,
It yet shines through every sense perception.
Bound to nothing, It yet sustains everything.
Unaffected by the Qualities, It still enjoys them all.
It is within all beings, yet outside;
motionless yet moving; too subtle to be perceived;
far away yet always near.
In all beings undivided, yet living in division,
It is the upholder of all, Creator and Destroyer alike;
It is the Light of lights, beyond the reach of darkness...
the Presence in the hearts of all.

from *The Perennial Wisdom for the Spiritually Independent*, by Rami Shapiro:

Think in terms of white light shining through a prism to reveal the full spectrum of color perceivable by the human eye: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Each of these colors is part of the original whole and can't be separated from it - turn off the light source and the colors disappear. Now apply this metaphor to the world around and within you. Everything you see, think, feel, and imagine is a part of and never apart from the same Source. We call this Source by such names as God, Reality, Brahman, Allah, One, Krishna, the Absolute, and the Nondual. The list of names is long; the reality to which they all point is the same.

Sermon

When I was twelve or thirteen years old, my parents entertained visitors from out west for a few days. Their visit happened to include a Sunday, so the plan was to take them to the nearby Unitarian Universalist Church to which we belonged. Everyone piled in the car and off they went to church.

I say “they” because I had quite accidentally been left behind.

This was of course way before the invention of cell phones; so I couldn’t call anyone, and they couldn’t call me. I don’t remember just how it was that someone realized I was not in the car. It may have been after they piled out at the church. In any case, someone did come back for me.

I still have a vivid recollection of waiting at the end of the driveway in my jacket and tie on that sunny Sunday morning. And I also vividly recall the feeling of having been forgotten, left out... and then remembered and included once again.

Now, I’m sure this didn’t occur to me at the time, but with the virtue of hindsight perspective, I can understand this vignette as a metaphor for our spiritual lives. And it is a metaphor that begins to point in the direction of what is called the perennial philosophy or perennial tradition or perennial wisdom.

Here’s what I mean. Our experience of life is sometimes, maybe often in our age, an experience of alienation – of feeling alone in the vast universe, feeling alone anywhere, even in the midst of a crowd, feeling somehow separated from... well, from what we do not even seem to know, some source maybe, but what source...

The Sufi poet Rumi begins one of his most famous passages, the song of the reed flute, this way:

Listen to the story told by the reed,
of being separated.
"Since I was cut from the reedbed,
I have made this crying sound.
Anyone apart from someone he loves
understands what I say.
Anyone pulled from a source
longs to go back.

That Sunday morning I just might have experienced a taste of that longing, manifest in a very prosaic experience. But it may be that anytime we experience such a longing – for a loved one, for a place or a time of life or an experience – we are experiencing a *taste* of the most universal and deepest longing of all, the longing for connection or re-connection or realizing that we have never *not* been connected to our cosmic source, a longing to put it another way to be at home in life, in the universe.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

It was just a little after that time of my life that I felt drawn to the big questions that life poses for us all: what's it all about, where did we come from, where are we going, is there a God, if so what is the nature of God?

Our family's discovery of Unitarian Universalism not long before these questions began to nag at me at the very least offered a safe place to ask such questions.

But – as we Unitarian Universalists well know – the answers are another matter; the answers we seek for ourselves – yes, in community, but in the end each of us seek answers to life's most perplexing questions on our own.

So my path of questions and occasional intimations of answers included – as most of you have heard me describe at one time or another – the study of philosophy and religion in college, learning some yoga and meditation also during those college years, and most consistently of all a continual return over all the years since to ancient wisdom texts including the sayings of Jesus, the Hindu Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads, various Buddhist writings, the Tao Te Ching, the poetry of Rumi... the list goes on.

Why always returning to these writings? What has been their hold on me?

My first – and maybe last – response to this question is simple enough. When I read certain passages in these books, my whole being says “ahhh!” I read certain lines or verses and my whole being relaxes – as if, one might say, as if I have been remembered, included, welcomed... as if I have come home... to myself remembering who I most truly am:

Jesus: “Behold, the kingdom of God is within you.”

Bhagavad Gita: The Spirit, which pervades all that we see, is imperishable.

Upanishads: Then the father said, “Here likewise in this body of yours, my son, you do not perceive the True; but there in fact it is. In that which is the subtle essence, all that exists has its self. That is the True, that is the Self, and thou... art That.”

The Buddhist *Dhammapada*: Him (or her) I call a Brahmin who is free from *I, me, mine*, who knows the rise and fall of life. This person is awake: will not fall asleep again... This person has reached the end of the way... crossed the river of life. All that had to be done is done: this person has become one with all life.

Rumi (again): Anyone pulled from a source longs to go back.

Such writings, each from a different cultural context, different religious context, different time, even so hold so much deeply in common. And one way of naming just what it is that they hold in common is through the phrase the perennial wisdom, also called the perennial philosophy.

Yet my sermon title *asks*: “Is there a Perennial Wisdom?”

Well, before we try to answer that question, it would be worth knowing a bit more of what that wisdom or philosophy is said to be.

The term or phrase goes back at least to the Italian Catholic humanist Agostino Steuco, writing in the sixteenth century, and then to the German philosopher Leibniz, whose life straddled the 17th and 18th centuries. In our own time, the phrase “perennial philosophy” was most famously used as the title of Aldous Huxley’s anthology composed in the 1940s, a book that became a bible of sorts for those exploring the world’s mystical traditions during the ensuing decades.

And it was a book that I found intriguing, even inspiring, long before I actually read it all the way through during the past year or so. For simply the idea of a “perennial philosophy” rang true for me. Wishful and hopeful thinking? Or... suggesting that some deep spiritual chord was being sounded simply by the idea of a perennial philosophy or perennial wisdom?

By dramatic contrast, we live in an age in which on the one hand many feel that all truth is relative, that nothing, certainly no wisdom, is perennial... and on the other hand an age in which there are far too many who are convinced that they have found the truth and that their or their religion’s *formulation* of the truth is the only truth, all others be damned.

I find neither alternative – utter relativism or some exclusionary truth – to be attractive... or actually likely to be true to the way things are.

Hence the appeal of some truth that is perennial. But again: Wishful thinking? Or pointing to something more real and enduring than anything else?

Okay, then, what does the so-called perennial philosophy or wisdom say?

My own paraphrase, based on many others, goes something like this:

Our individual self, the self that has a name, roles, personality, and so forth – sometimes known as ego (not in a pejorative sense, but simply as a way of naming our singleness and individuality) – is a manifestation of a larger reality, in fact the largest reality known by many names: God, Allah, Brahman, Tao, Spirit, Source – the many names of the one reality.

Further, this wisdom affirms that we can through certain practices go beyond knowing in some logical sense that we are each part of, manifestation of, the larger whole – to *experiencing* ourselves as one with this larger reality. The Hindus say Atman (the individual soul) is in the end equivalent to Brahman (the world soul we might say). “That are Thou” they say. “That” which Emerson called the Oversoul, our Higher Self.

Yet further, affirms the perennial wisdom, this realizing to one degree or another that our individual nature is part and parcel of the nature of God, Spirit, Universe, Oversoul, is the most important thing we can strive to do.

And finally, to the extent that we realize this double nature of ours (individual manifestation of the whole), realize the unity of life, we will live more kindly, compassionately, lovingly. (And conversely, living more kindly, compassionately, and lovingly will help us to realize who we most truly are.)

So, far from being a purely individual enterprise leading to a cave or hermitage divorced from the messy realities of life as we know it, this seeking to realize our individual identity as part of, at one with, the larger or divine identity is a way of becoming more engaged in and a more loving part of this whole of life.

Now: *Is* this the way things are? To put the question another way, though there certainly *is* a perennial philosophy... is it truly a perennial *wisdom*?

Most days I believe it is. After all, isn't it simply the wisdom of knowing our place, our place right here and now, in this mysterious world as it is and not as we would wish it to be, this world with its joy and sorrow intertwined, the mystery of suffering being not least of all the mysteries of this life? Isn't it, further, the wisdom to know how best to live in this world as it is?

When Jesus said that "the kingdom of God is within you," the double meaning of his language suggested both "within" and "among" – spread before us had we eyes to see, he said. To see what? To *see* the unity of life, to *see* that all comes from one Source however we choose to name it – God or stardust – and to see that the life best lived is the life which realizes, experiences, feels a taste and then more than a taste of this reality and so lives a life of greater compassion and kindness.

Aldous Huxley, near the end of his life, the same Huxley who had composed that several hundred page dense anthology of writings called *The Perennial Philosophy*... said "It's a little embarrassing that after forty-five years of research and study, the best advice I can give people is to be a little kinder to each other."

He of course shouldn't have been embarrassed. His journey was simply something like all our journeys as T.S. Eliot expressed it: "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

That family journey to church fifty or so years ago. In another life or another sort of family, the memory would perhaps be a painful one of having been forgotten. But it is not so. For I was remembered – and it didn't take very long to be remembered at that.

A gift it was, and now all these years later the gift has taken on this larger meaning, reminding me, and perhaps reminding you, that we do belong in the universe, this web of existence, this one reality, so that even when we are feeling alone, feeling left out or left behind, we do still belong.

As Max Ehrmann, writer of the passage known as the *Desiderata*, put it so beautifully – and this may be as succinct an expression of the heart of the perennial wisdom as any: "You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here."

Amen.