

# Using Synergy, Diversity and Wholeness to Create a Wisdom Culture

"The whole is more than the sum of its parts."

"More than." What is this more-than-ness? I've been fascinated with this question for over a decade.

When we have all the parts to something, how is that different from the whole thing? What needs to be added to make a whole?

Above all, I think, we need **relationship** and **connection**. The pieces of a bicycle, spread out on the garage floor, are not a bicycle. Only the pieces assembled -- that is, arranged and connected into proper relationship -- are a bicycle.

Note that such special relationships and connections -- out of hundreds of possible relationships and connections -- generate something "more" for the parts or the whole. In the case of our bicycle, the pedals have to be in a special relationship with the wheels to enable the rider's feet to move the bicycle forward. If the pedals are where the seat should be, they can't do their job. Such "right relationship" is called "synergy."

In a living system, another word for this is "health." To the extent all the parts of a living system are in right relationship to each other and to the system as a whole, that system is healthy. Linguistically, the word "health" derives from the same root as the word "whole," as in "wholesome."

So right relationship, synergy, connectedness, and health are all aspects of the magic that makes a whole "more than" the sum of its parts. We'll get to other aspects in a moment, but first I want to consider some different types of synergy.

## STATIC AND DYNAMIC SYNERGY

First, synergy can be static or dynamic. In dynamic synergy, the power of the relationship derives from the active interaction of the people or things involved, like jazz musicians "in a groove." In static synergy, the power derives simply from the design, the way things are placed in relation to each other, like a beautiful flower arrangement.

We see static synergy in the strength of a triangle. Metal beams holding up a bridge or a geodesic dome have more strength because they're arranged as triangles than they would if they were

arranged as squares. The triangle shape, itself -- which is pure relationship -- has intrinsic strength independent of the strength of the beams. The poles in a geodesic dome provide more strength collectively than they do individually, simply because they are arranged in triangles. That's static synergy. The poles aren't doing anything. They're just sitting there in triangles being strong.

A million people standing in a silent vigil before the Presidential Palace have static synergy.

Dynamic synergy, in contrast, involves interactions that create, generate, or enable something. There's dynamic synergy in the interactive population dynamics of predator and prey, where each keeps the other in balance (more foxes => less rabbits => less foxes => more rabbits => more foxes, etc.). And there's synergy between lovers, as stimulus and response heighten responsiveness and engagement upwards to a dynamic peak.

## **SYNERGY AND DIVERSITY**

Interestingly, diversity is a prerequisite for truly dynamic synergy. If everyone in a conversation has the same perspective, we'll see only low-level synergy, if any, but certainly nothing very exciting or productive. However if there are lots of diverse views, AND if those differences are allowed to surface, AND if there are good communication processes, then those differences will almost certainly stimulate a blossoming of ideas no one thought about before they entered the conversation. The whole can become greater than the sum of its parts to the extent those parts are different, and to the extent those differences are handled creatively.

Even in the bicycle example, it is easy to see how important it is that the parts of the bicycle be different: If every part were a wheel, we wouldn't have much of a bicycle, would we?

New levels of organization and phenomena can only emerge from new combinations of things different in form, function, perspective, and so on. That's the secret of two of nature's most creative dynamos: DNA and sexual reproduction: When different genetic patterns interact, we get even more novelty, allowing even more complex, powerful forms of synergy -- entirely new wholes -- to emerge. Natural selection -- a dynamic form of synergy between every organism -- prunes nature's abundant novelty so that the most workable possibilities persist. So, too, with learning and dialogue: ideas, perspectives and experiences mix and match, stimulating the creative birth and death of ideas, perspectives and experiences into a world of greater understanding. This is all dynamic synergy.

## **THE SYNERGY OF WHOLE AND PARTS**

So far we've been considering the relationships -- the synergy -- between parts. But there is another major category of relationship that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts, and that is the **relationship** of the parts to the whole, itself.

In a bicycle, each part has a function that derives from -- and contributes to -- the function of the entire bicycle: wheels for moving, handlebars for steering, pedals for setting everything in motion -- all contributing to helping the biker get where they're going. Similarly, organs of the body each have a very specific relationship to the function of the whole body. And ecologists study the relationship that each species has to its whole ecosystem. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, not only because there's synergy between the parts, but because the parts contribute to the whole, and manifest its essence, purpose or function.

That relationship goes both ways. The whole has a special relationship to its parts. At a most basic level, the whole is the reason for the part's existence. The logic of the whole governs the life of the part. The wheel by itself has little logic to its life without being part of the bicycle (or some other vehicle). Its purpose is tied to the Larger Purpose of Mobility.

A whole healthy organization or community tends to care for its members or citizens, to a greater or lesser degree. Any whole needs parts in good condition in order to function well, so it behooves it to care for its parts. In ecosystems, we see incredibly complex webs of interaction whereby the whole ecosystem "cares" -- in quite unique ways -- for each species that makes it up. Often benefit happens at every level: When a group of people together articulate a common vision, that vision (a) gives meaning to their individual lives, (b) coordinates their individual actions (sometimes with little explicit coordination), (c) eases their interactions with each other and with group-level functionaries, (d) inspires mutual aid among comrades and (e) increases the strength and coherence of the group as a whole -- all at once!

**So in a healthy whole, the parts have healthy relationships among each other, AND there is synergy (both ways) between the parts and the whole.**

But the closer we look, the more there is to see....

## **LAYERS OF SYNERGY -- EVEN WITH HIGHER POWERS**

In living systems each part is part of MORE than one whole. For example, I'm part of several living systems -- a household, a number of groups, several families, many networks, some communities, a handful of traditions, a powerful country, a web of cultural agreements, the natural cycle of oxygen and carbon, at least one transcendental Higher Power, and so on. To limit an analysis of me to any one of these is to miss who I am and to oversimplify my role in The Whole.

Synergizing these roles can enhance the mystical "more-ness" that characterizes wholeness. For example, I can improve my household and my family by bringing to them my perspective as a member of the movement for sustainability and democracy. And my experience in families and households can inform my social change work.

We can use synergy with a "higher power" to enhance the synergy with each other and the world. A team can work really well together, generating lots of INTERNAL synergy. But when it "gets

in the flow" it joins some larger energy that makes everything effortless. Similarly, traditional Quakers pray or meditate together -- seeking God's will -- during their consensus decision-making process.

When groups like these become "attuned" to -- or synergized with -- some Higher Power, they become MORE than just their group. Note that that "more-ness" is IN ADDITION TO the "more-ness" that the group already has through the synergy of its members with each other and with the whole group.

This can also happen with an individual. One's synergistic relationship to a higher power -- whether it be to a group, a purpose, a place or a Supreme Being -- is usually experienced as a wellspring of Life. This is the essence of synergy, and one of the great secrets of wholeness.

And so we find that more-ness can stack on top of more-ness, synergy on top of synergy. This is the power of looking at wholeness. Each of these types of more-ness is a free source of energy for life and for projects that affirm and serve life.

## **EMBODIMENT**

But there's more to wholeness than synergy. For example, a whole can manifest directly through its parts. Every human being is a unique expression of the whole of humanity. Every flower and forest is a direct expression of nature, of the totality of organic aliveness. Every moment contains the whole of time -- a phenomenon we know as eternity.

Some call this communion. But it is not a "coming together" (which is the synergy factor). This is different. This is EMBODIMENT -- a manifestation at the micro (specific) level of some Greater Reality that exists at the macro (general) level -- the way a police officer embodies "The Police", the way a mother embodies "Motherhood", the way Macbeth embodies "Tragedy".

Here the whole isn't greater than the sum of its parts -- it TRANSCENDS the difference between whole and part, taking on an archetypal energy that can show up anywhere.

Diversity has a magical role in the dynamics of embodiment. The richness of the whole depends on the uniqueness of its parts. If all mothers were the same, there would be little magic in Motherhood. If all spirits were the same, there would be little magic in Spirit. The uniqueness of each embodiment of the whole gives texture, meaning, power and depth to the whole, itself. And then that greater vitality enlivens each unique expression or embodiment of the whole.

Since Spirit can be viewed as the ultimate wholeness, we find in this phenomenon -- as well as in the previously discussed phenomenon of connection with a higher power -- a realm of spiritual wholeness that's called "holy". It is no accident that this word, like "health", shares roots with the word "whole". Wholesome, holy, healthy....

## **AN ULTIMATE TRUTH**

Of course there's more to wholeness than this. There always is. In fact, the secret motto of wholeness is, "There's more to it than that!" -- which happens to be true in every circumstance, and may be the most important thing we can know at any particular time. "There's more to it than that!" is truly a universal truth.

So we're going to stop our theoretical explorations of the Realm of Wholeness and, carrying our accumulated insights with us, travel to a realm seldom entered by holistic theoreticians.

## **HOLISTIC POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE**

We've seen that to be healthy, a society needs its parts to be in synergistic relationship with each other. A society's diverse parts include citizens, interest groups, sectors, perspectives, communities, etc. What would help all these to be in synergy with each other -- and with the whole of society -- and with nature, humanity, and Spirit?

One answer is dialogue -- lots of high quality, powerful dialogue on subjects that matter, happening everywhere. Dialogue is our primary tool for using diversity creatively. With good dialogue, our diversity becomes a resource for more vibrant relationships, more wise decisions, more brilliant solutions, more nuanced insights, more appropriate coordination, more exciting shared dreams. Without dialogue -- with poor communication or no communication -- we waste all that. We get in each other's way. We make messes. We blunder together into global catastrophe.

Fragmented from each other, nature and Spirit, we become capable of killing each other simply because we're different.

We reconnect through dialogue. Using our diversity creatively to generate greater, deeper, wiser wholeness among us, we end up with a healthy society.

The kind of democracy we have now -- interest groups fighting for majority power -- ignores "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." It just sums the parts (using majority voting) and sets one part ("side") against the others in an eternal battle for that ever-shifting majority.

There is precious little room in these activities for developing any of the "more-ness" we've been talking about, which is a quality, not a quantity -- a synergistic relationship, not a victory.

How can there be a politics of synergy, of "more-ness" -- where the final result is greater than all the "sides"? It is possible through dialogue -- especially through good processes that help different perspectives really hear each other and share the gifts of their insights. By doing this, they establish better relationships and grow into broader perspectives that include everyone's views. On such strong foundations, they can then proceed to create understandings, options and activities that none of them thought of before -- new pathways to heal differences, not by

suppressing them but by celebrating them and synergizing their gifts into a world that works for all.

Debate doesn't give us that. It gives us winners and losers. And the losers' role is to then do what they can to undermine the winners. And everyone's creativity goes into the battle to push their position, often with mutually degrading results -- rather than into co-creating something new and good.

## **DIVERSITY AND "THE VOICE OF THE WHOLE"**

Only recently did I learn to wonder: Where in this battleground is there room for voices on behalf of the common good, the Whole? As environmentalists and social justice activists know, a voice for the common good is -- in our form of democracy -- forced to act as just one more special interest group. Despite the founding of the United States by "We, The People," there is no institution in our politics or governance that actually speaks with the Voice of The People, seeking the wisdom and welfare of The Whole. There is no forum in which the rich diversity of society can seek greater wholeness. It is all battle. It is all waste. It is such a shame. Especially in the face of our desperate need for wisdom.

Where can we turn for a change in all this?

To wholeness. Remember the embodiment principle -- how a part can embody the whole? Our representative democracy was supposed to be that. But is it? When you look at Congress, do you see the diversity of America? Are all voices heard? Do they seek the integration of their differences into creative wholeness?

If we took the principle of embodiment seriously, representation would embrace our full diversity. When we looked at a representative body, we'd see reflected there our whole community or country. And when that body talked, we would hear all our voices, all our concerns, all our perspectives -- and all our creativity, working together to understand and nurture the welfare of The Whole.

Increasingly, there are experiments based on this principle. A common one in environmental conflicts is convening a diverse group of stakeholders -- loggers, ranchers, environmentalists, townspeople, businesspeople, government officials, community organizers -- and giving them good facilitation that helps them hear each other and craft solutions that serve everyone. Even the mixed success of this approach is so much better than the wasteland of The Battle that more and more such meetings are convened, and their record improves as more is learned about how to organize and run them. This is lucky, because environmental conflicts are on the increase.

But take a moment to notice that we don't have to have ALL the loggers, ALL the environmentalists, ALL the community's citizens directly involved in such a dialogue. We just need to have those diverse viewpoints present in the conversation. This doesn't mean that the whole community should not be involved. In fact, to have the greatest impact, the unfolding of

such a stakeholder conversation should be watched (or reviewed) by the public -- and many subsidiary dialogues should be organized, in which all community members can digest what happened.

Ultimately, of course, none of us fits totally into some category like "environmentalist" or "rancher." We are more than our roles as stakeholders. We are unique, complex, multi-faceted human beings. How do we include this nearly infinite diversity in our public dialogue?

There is no way to select a group that mechanically includes our total diversity. But you don't need to eat a whole soup to know how it tastes. A spoonful will do. We can select a group whose facilitated **dialogue** will reflect the potential creative wisdom of their entire community. Evidence suggests there may be a critical mass of diversity that, through dialogue, dependably generates consensus insights and solutions that are useful to the whole community, and are widely recognized as wise. This is a rich area for research toward a wiser democracy.

Holding such dialogues regularly increases their power to fully represent a community's diversity. Randomly selecting a different group of a few dozen people every quarter for a community -- or every year for a country -- would, over time, engage a tremendous amount of diversity. With good facilitation designed to honor and creatively utilize those differences, such an institution could generate deep wisdom and incisive solutions that could then be shared with the whole population for further dialogue and action.

THAT would be a Voice of The People. That would be the most legitimate General Interest Group imaginable. And the fact that it happened regularly, with the results being constantly fed back into The Whole, would mean that The Whole community (or country) could learn. As time went on, it could change its Mind about the issues it was wrestling with and grow wiser through new experiences and perspectives entering the ongoing conversation.

It is possible for politics to serve the needs of the whole society using the wisdom of the whole society, using our understanding of wholeness, synergy and diversity. What would happen if this perspective became as central to democracy as voting is now? What would it take to make that happen?

I'll leave the answers to those questions blowing in the wind, whispering in the hearts and minds of those seeking a wiser, more wholesome civilization through **powerful conversations** with each other.

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