22 Wisdom as Learned Ignorance

Integrating East–West Perspectives

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> *Wisdom (which all men seek with such great mental longing) is . . . higher than all knowledge and is unknowable and inexpressible by any speech, incomprehensible by any intellect, unmeasurable by any measure . . .*
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> —Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Sapienta*

> *A wise man has no extensive knowledge. He who has extensive knowledge is not a wise man.*
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> —Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

Wisdom is an ancient, enigmatic, and intractable notion whose abiding influence in professional practice in general, and in management practice in particular, remains ever elusive. In this chapter, we develop the idea of wisdom as a form of *learned ignorance*—a cultivated humility, meekness of demeanor, and openness of mind that is distinct and different from the aggressive and relentless pursuit, acquisition, and exploitation of knowledge. Rather than associate wisdom with learning, we argue that it is ironically *unlearning* that is the path toward genuine wisdom and insight. The inability to attain wisdom arises, paradoxically, from a contemporary obsession with knowledge and information. Wisdom is not about having more information or constructing irrefutable propositions. True wisdom exceeds these quantifiable elements. It takes its cue from vagueness and ambiguity. There is something necessarily strange and foreign about wisdom, although

not so foreign as to be entirely alien. Wisdom is rarely to be found in formal learning or knowledge. Rather, it "cries out in the streets" in the hurly-burly of everyday goings-on. It begins, as Socrates discovered, with the knowledge of our ignorance.

Learning to Unlearn

In the East, a story is often told of an eminent scholar who was determined to learn about the ancient Tea Ceremony avidly practiced by Zen masters and to show that this was nothing more than an empty, superfluous, and meaningless ritual. Arriving at the residence of the Zen master, the scholar was duly invited in, both host and guest sat crossed-legged on a mat, and then the Zen master proceeded to pour tea first into his own teacup and then into the visitor's teacup. The Zen master, a frail man in his early 90s with unsteady hands, continued to fill the visitor's cup even after it was clearly full. The tea began to overspill onto the mat, and the visitor—thinking that his host had difficulty in coordinating his movements because of his advanced age—determined politely to ignore the spillage. More tea continued to be poured, so much so that the overspill now began to spread over the floor. At this point, the visitor, unable to restrain himself any further, exclaimed, "Zen master stop! Can't you see? No more tea can go into the cup. It is already too full." The Zen master looked at him and said, "You . . . are exactly like this cup of tea. You are already so full of knowledge. How can I fill you with any more knowledge about this Tea Ceremony? Unless you empty the cup of knowledge you already possess, you will not begin to truly appreciate the subtleties and profound lessons contained in this ancient ritual."

This short vignette vividly illustrates how knowledge often gets in the way of genuine insight and how difficult it is for the clever and the learned to attain wisdom. It also elevates the role of *unlearning* in the quest for wisdom. That wisdom is not to be found in books or formal learning but rather in practical experiences is also emphasized by Nicholas of Cusa (1996, pp. 497–503), the 15th-century German cleric, in the following dialogue between the a poor layman and a very wealthy orator (scholar) in the Roman Forum:

Layman: I am amazed at your pride because although in perusing countless books you tire yourself with continual reading, you have not yet been brought to a state of humility. . . . True knowledge makes one humble. . . .

Orator: [Oh] poor, utterly unschooled Layman, what is this presumption of yours [that leads] you thus to make light of the study of written learning, without which study no one makes progress?

Layman: [Oh] Great Orator, it is not presumption, but love, that does not allow me to keep silent. . . . The opinion of authority has held you back, so that you are as a horse that by nature is free but that by contrivance is tied with a halter to a stall, where it eats nothing but what is served to it. For your intellect, restricted to the authority of writings, is fed by strange and unnatural food.

Orator: If the nourishment that comes from wisdom is not present in the books of the wise, then where is it present?

Layman: . . . I maintain that no *natural* nourishment is to be found there. For those who first devoted themselves to writing about wisdom did not derive their growth from the nourishment of books, which did not yet exist; rather by means of natural foods they were brought unto the state of being grown men. And by far they excel in wisdom those others who suppose that they have learned from books.

The dialogue eventually ends with the scholar suitably persuaded of the wisdom of the layman:

Orator: You relate such beautiful things. Explain now, I ask, how can I be elevated into some kind of tasting of Eternal Wisdom?

The basic point that seems to be made repeatedly is that knowledge, information, and symbolic representations, rather than help us to grasp pristine reality, often distract and distort our understanding of the latter. Despite the wonderful achievements of modern science and formal knowledge, we remain at a loss to explain the bases for human hope, resilience, bravery, authenticity, happiness, and tragedy. Wisdom eludes us. Despite all of our material achievements, we remain perpetually in want—always seeking that which is bigger, better, newer, faster, and fuller. "Man," wrote the existential humanist Eric Fromm, is an "eternal suckling" with a voracious and insatiable appetite. Because we ordinarily think of our lack in terms of a "gap" in knowledge or possessions, our instinctive tendency is to seek to fill this unfillable void at the core of our being. In that very process, we lose our grip on that which is most near and dear to us—the very richness of life itself. The poet T. S. Eliot lamented this loss poignantly in *The Rock:* "Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the Wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the Knowledge we have lost in information?" (Eliot, 1934, Chorus 1). Living debases life, knowledge debases wisdom, and information debases knowledge. Rather than lead us on the path toward greater wisdom and fulfillment, more knowledge and possessions actually distances us from what is fundamental to life.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan maintained that this unfillable existential void is one initiated through our very entry into the symbolic

world of language (Lacan, 1977, pp. 20–29). The desire to know is our attempt to recover this primordial loss—to "plug" this emptiness at the very core of our being that is the root of our ignorance and our very condition for knowledge. Knowledge, therefore, lies on a bed of ignorance; to know is also to "owe," to incur a debt to what one does not know. To know that one does not know, as Socrates concluded, is to begin to acknowledge the inherent *owing* in kn*owing*—the ignorance of knowledge. Puzzling on a pronouncement of a priestess at Delphi that he, Socrates, was the wisest of men, Socrates realized that his own preeminence came from his refusal to claim knowledge that he did not have. Socrates was wise because he was acutely aware of his ignorance and of how much it took to confront this ignorance. The literary critic Barbara Johnson echoed this insight when she wrote, "Ignorance, far more than knowledge, is what can never be taken for granted. If I perceive my ignorance as a gap in knowledge instead of an imperative that changes the very nature of what I think I know, then I do not truly experience my ignorance" (Johnson, 1989, p. 16). Only when we become painfully aware that it is *ignorance of our ignorance,* and not a simple gap in knowledge, that prevents profound insights do we then begin to glimpse that illusive realm called wisdom. It is this Socratic idea of a state of heightened awareness of ignorance that is implied by the term *learned ignorance.*

In this final chapter of the volume, we maintain that the substantive concerns of philosophical inquiry—metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, and aesthetics—are essentially metaphors, intermediary vehicles of transport (*metaphorikos*), that carry us toward that which is ultimately unnameable but knowable,, in other words, wisdom. True wisdom cannot be attained by an overreliance on these knowledge categories. To grasp the Socratic view of wisdom, we must learn to transcend words, disciplinary boundaries, and substantive knowledge by "purifying" thought and cleansing ourselves of the overwhelming dependence on such conceptual categories. Only then can we attain that state of awareness that Nicholas of Cusa called "learned ignorance." Wisdom-in-practice is exemplified by what we call here *performative extravagance*—a sudden spontaneous outpouring of offerings that produces outstanding achievements that withstand the test of time. Individual and organizational wisdom is exemplified by the internalized capacity to *resist* surface appearances, quantification, and knowledge representations and to rediscover the true *measure of things* (Bohm, 1980, pp. 20–21) so that wise decisions may be made. This is the real challenge for organizational leaders and policymakers.

Knowledge, Understanding, and Wisdom Through the Ages

Socrates's wisdom—his awareness of the ignorance underlying all forms of knowing—reflects his wider concern with ethical and moral development.

For him, this love of wisdom (*philosophia*) does not provide prescriptive doctrines but rather is a way of life characterized by the method of refutation. Living a good life implies always being prepared to cross-examine knowledge claims wherever they are made. Through such persistent inquiry and refutation (dialectic), we realize that what is most valuable above all things are not proofs or possession of facts but rather the personal ethical development arising from putting ideas and activities to a test. For his pupil Plato, however, philosophy ought to be able to say something more about our experiences of the world and its foundations than merely exposing us to constant irony, paradox, and refutation. Socrates occupies a watershed, looking back to an ancient, poetic, and nearly intuitive struggle with meaning while also suggesting ways forward through an advocacy of philosophical dialectic method by which we can expand and enrich human awareness. Plato, frustrated with the former Socrates, took his cue from the latter, suggesting that rather than simply being about individual ethical development, the love of wisdom ought to become a formalized discipline with specific branches: *metaphysics* (the investigation of the ultimate questions of being and existence), *epistemology* (the extent and accrual of human knowledge), *dialectic* (the concern with correct modes of reasoning), *ethics* (the consideration of principles of right and wrong), and *aesthetics* (the appreciation of what stimulates our imagination and senses). These five cognate areas (with dialectic developing into logic) have become the widely accepted frameworks for Western philosophical inquiry and, as exemplified in this volume, the conventional basis for discussing issues such as managerial and organizational wisdom. In this sense, Platonic systematizing concerns have tended to override the Socratic emphasis on the love of wisdom through personal development so much so that we now view wisdom through the prism of Platonic ideals. Our purpose in this chapter is to reverse the priority.

Whereas Socrates gestured to the acceptance of ignorance as a condition of personal growth and development, Plato tended to emphasize the value of philosophy as the vehicle for fully articulating our human condition—for revealing our rational selves and their foundation in the essential and unchanging furniture of existence. This aspiration for philosophy is played out in his Plato's *The Republic* (509–511), where he made a distinction between the *visible* world and the *intelligible* world (Plato, 1875). The visible world is a world of *appearances* and manifest *forms* that reflect, albeit imperfectly, an underlying realm of perfect unchanging forms (e.g., pure justice, goodness, truth, beauty, equality). All reality is derived from this ultimate realm of unchanging forms, resembling it in some way or another and ultimately returning to it. The task of the various branches of philosophy is to take us from our half-formed *opinions* to a proper *knowledge* of relations using methods of dialectic. Through dialectic, we are able to reach the unchanging forms and hence a state of wisdom (*sophia*) in which we become aware of the harmonious unity of all things—the soul, the state, and the universe (Robinson, 1990, p. 15). Whereas Socrates's use of argumentation pushes at limits and limitations, Plato's use of

argumentation identifies unshakable foundations. Whereas Socrates advocated *learned ignorance* as the basis of wisdom, Plato advocated systematic inquiry as the route to *sophia.*

Plato's successor, Aristotle, offered a far less stringent view of wisdom. Wisdom is something accrued through living a life informed by the actions of one's personal and social history rather than the degree of perfection of one's ahistorical dialogue with the realm of ultimate forms. Whereas for Plato correct reasoning concerned the use of dialectic to penetrate the intelligible world, Aristotle was more sanguine, accepting that what can be said to be essential about things is to be found within that thing itself rather than in its aping a separate transcendent realm. With this focus on things as they are experienced, Aristotle argued that one thing (p) is made distinct from another (not p) by virtue of its basic substance and the links made between this and other substances. Here it is *logic,* as much as metaphysics, that leads to insight, where correct reasoning involves the coherent progression from more general premises to a more particular conclusion (*deduction*) or from specific premises to more general conclusions (*induction*). Through such proper reasoning, knowledge becomes understood as "justified belief" rather than as the more lofty attainment of foundation-less foundations implied by the notion of ultimate forms.

Defining correct reasoning as the analysis of how meaning is attained through logical relations afforded Aristotle scope to begin to separate *knowledge* from wisdom. Knowledge concerns true statements about what exists, whereas with the dilution of metaphysical speculation, wisdom is less a concern with the nature of ultimate reality than with the disposition (*hexis*) to determine when specific uses of reason (informed by emotion and logic) are appropriate (when to be resolute and when to be cautious or whose happiness to favor) (Robinson, 1990, p. 19). This practical wisdom, or *phronesis,* consists of the sensitivity, imagination, and perceptiveness that come from, first, having lived and matured sufficiently to understand how people act and, second, the ability to discern which features of any given state of affairs count for more than others (MacIntyre, 1982). Whereas for Plato the wise are all-encompassing, would-be deities in epistemological communion with the metaphysical foundations governing life, for Aristotle they are people intent on acting well by learning which actions are appropriate, when and where, and for what reasons (Clark, 2003).

This pragmatic view paves the way for the gradual rise of an instrumentalized understanding of wisdom exemplified by social realist thinkers like Machiavelli for whom *phronesis* became nothing more than the ability to act and aver from action according to dictates of circumstance (Machiavelli, 1989, pp. 38–39). Wisdom was a tactical activity of organizing oneself and others so as to bring about a more secure and harmonious human condition. So, for example, Machiavelli's (1989) "wise" prince recognized the following:

> Injuries are to be done all together, so that, being savored less, they will anger less; benefits are to be conferred little by little, so they will be savored more. And above all, a wise prince lives with his subjects in such a way that no unforeseen event, either for bad or for good, makes him change; because when, in adverse times, emergencies arise, you are too late for harshness, and the good you do does not help you, because it is considered forced and you get for it no thanks whatever. (pp. 38–39)

Here wisdom is being set up almost in contradistinction to virtue. Machiavelli's *Discourses* recognizes the value of republican virtue but also recognizes its being too idealistic for the human stock inhabiting the city states of Renaissance Europe. Wise rulers prefer social realpolitik to the slavish adoption of fixed principles.

Consigning wisdom to a political level meant a more focused concern within the discipline of philosophy for establishing the foundations of knowledge from within a technical epistemology. This increasing emphasis on rigor and formalism described by the term *natural science* culminated with the 18th-century *empiricists,* for whom questions of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics have unnecessarily impinged on the proper investigation of human ideas and knowledge. The wider questions of being, beauty, and good judgment are "cut away" from the technical pursuit of truth. Metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics deal in intractable problems of spirit, taste, and edict, whereas epistemology (and logic) deals in the unalloyed experience of nature using the methods of verification and proof. The evaluative framing of spiritual, imaginative, and moral statements means that they are consigned to the status of intractable value judgments; they become factually insignificant (Grayling, 2004, p. 217). What remains significant is simply our experience of nature—direct. Yet appeals to direct or unmediated experience (what Francis Bacon evocatively called "standing naked like a child before nature") are no guarantee of truthful knowledge claims. The empiricists still need to respond to the criticism that reliance on our senses to yield accurate mental impressions by which ideas might be built is itself empirically unverifiable. We cannot stand outside of our senses to judge their veracity, and so simply relying on sensory experience to ground our knowledge exposes the entire empirical enterprise to skepticism. It is not so easy to dispense with the background values inherent in questions of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics.

Modern Notions of Wisdom and Knowledge

Despite the persistence of such skepticism regarding empiricism, it was not until perhaps the writings of Nietzsche that the dominance of this form of

empirical knowledge was seriously challenged. For Nietzsche, Western versions of natural science and the triumph of empirical knowledge were, he argued, so intoxicated with a desire for fact and fear-averting logic that they failed to realize their artificiality. Knowledge was imprisoned by its own objectifying epistemology, what Nietzsche called an Apollonian logical order whose rigidity and stiffness served to absolve us of the very thing that made us human, namely *the responsibility of making choices from an awareness of our own historical complicity with the empirical events of which we seek knowledge*. We must "dare" to choose what it is we know and how to act while knowing that there is no ultimate rationality or reality that can justify our choices other than our need to act authentically.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead maintained that the impulse toward an objectifying epistemology issues from what he called a "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" (Whitehead, 1926/1985, p. 64)—the tendency to believe that the world was basically a material set of discrete objects and relations and that the pursuit of knowledge was the accurate and formal representation of such through language, concepts, and symbols. For Whitehead, the problem with this *epistemological representationalism* was simple: Its force depended entirely on what was to count as evidence, a question the empiricists had failed to ask themselves. What so exercizes Whitehead is that in the empiricist attempt to expunge metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics from the search for truth, a new abstracting shibboleth has emerged—the methodological logic of representationalism itself. It is only when people learned to resist such abstraction and to realize the importance of asserting themselves *against* these epistemological claims (e.g., truths, principles, controls, musts, dogmas) that the fallacy became recognized as such.

Emphasizing our complicity with and responsibility for the creation of knowledge meant that Nietzsche and Whitehead were beginning to revisit the capacity for *phronetic* wisdom because of its inherent acceptance that, unlike empirical knowledge and logical thought, contradiction was not a signal of defeat but rather the very lifeblood of human life (Whitehead, 1985, p. 279). Both Nietzsche and Whitehead emphasized a *phronesis* characterized by personal virtue (Greco, 2004), but where Nietzsche emphasized instinctive "Dionysian" virtues of courage and creative will, Whitehead was less trenchant and advocated the need for both boldness *and* humility. For both of them, however, it is by recognizing the paucity of logical knowledge produced by reason alone that we can begin to grow wise once more. Wisdom involves our abandoning a priori visions of perfection in favor of our own direct creative evolution. Hence, we arrive back at Socrates, but with a twist (as is embodied in Nietzsche's own ambivalent relationship with Socrates's work). Where Socrates's wisdom lay with his defiant insistence that knowledge carries its own risks if unaccompanied by awareness of one's own ignorance, Nietzsche and Whitehead suggested that wisdom is something more than simply a recognition of the inevitable limits of knowledge; rather, it is an ability to bring knowledge in harmonious balance with

instinct, emotion, and unconscious will as the sources of our personal creativity and growth.

The American philosopher William James termed this wisdom a metaphysics of last things rather than of first things—an acceptance that *what exists is simply what we experience as the inherently ambiguous and unfurling force of life* (James, 1907, pp. 45–55). For James, Whitehead, and Nietzsche, wisdom comes from recognizing how we as individuals are complicit with each and every event in our lives, recognizing how authentic being is in fact a state of *everyday becoming* without end, and recognizing that our own uniqueness as persons comes from lending experience the hue of personal involvement (Ansell-Pearson, 1999, pp. 127–128). With characteristic brio, Nietzsche called this sense of personal involvement—and hence responsibility—a "defiance of oneself." Such a view of wisdom as direct personal involvement in fashioning a life refines Sternberg's (1990, p. 153) distinction among wisdom, intelligence, and creativity.

Sternberg argued that if we assume that existing knowledge acts as a constraint on what we say and do, then the intelligent person works to exploit the constraints to the fullest extent, the creative person wishes to break free from the constraints and create alternatives, and the wise person seeks to understand the nature of the constraints. What distinguishes the wise from the intelligent and the simply intuitively creative is the awareness that our constraints of knowledge are human constraints and, hence, ours to change. The wise recognize that it is we who give value to our lives because it is we who divide the world into things, relations, and meanings, and we can do so differently (Searle, 2005). So at its most basic level, wisdom is an awareness of how people, often unwittingly, create and recreate the constraints of knowledge—how people often ignore or avoid the responsibilities of power associated with this complicity with knowledge, masked as it is by an intellectualizing logic of neutrality and objectivity.

This avoidance of taking responsibility for one's actions is well exemplified when organizational leaders, for example, look to justify their actions by appealing to the "demands of the market," or to the logic of cost calculus, as though they themselves were acting outside of these irrefutable facts. From Nietzsche's perspective, this tendency to appeal to "external" reality is both idle and weak—a refusal to take personal responsibility for actions. To be wise involves submitting to and wrestling with reality in all its intended and unintended interdependencies without regret and with a sense of personal responsibility. Wise people embrace doubt, ambiguities, consequences, and experiences—the *effects of decisions* that they need to live with and not just the decisions themselves. Within this "earthy" metaphysics, the concerns of wisdom turn from a question of adding to or expanding knowledge to one of being in close intimacy with our lived experiences. It is to appreciate that an apparent lack of explicit formal knowledge or external justification is not necessarily a situation to be avoided or associated with impotence. Rather, it is to accept that intellectual naïveté

and learned ignorance are the very conditions of possibility for an authentic existence.

Wisdom as Learned Ignorance: A View From the East

> The idea of "being" is the Archimedean point of Western thought. . . . The whole tradition of Western civilization [has] turned around this point. All is different in Eastern thought. . . . The central notion from which Oriental . . . belief as well as philosophical thought have been developed is the idea of "nothingness." (Y. Takeuchi, 1959, p. 292)

Something akin to this awareness of the virtue of naïveté and ignorance has existed in the East since time immemorial, and comparisons with Western views have occupied some of the most outstanding East–West scholars of our time (Chang, 1963; Graham, 1989; Needham, 1962; Nishitani, 1982). The sinologist Joseph Needham, for instance, argued that whereas for the dominant Western worldview "what mattered was an ideal world of static form which remained when the world of crude reality was dissolved away," for the Chinese "the real world was dynamic and ultimate, an organism made of an infinity of organisms, a rhythm harmonizing an infinity of lesser rhythms" (Needham, 1962, p. 292). The tendency to keep faith with language, logic, and reason, and hence to linguistically reduce the hurly-burly of life experiences to foundational book categories, is what we have seen characterizes the dominant Western epistemological attitude exemplified by the scholar in Nicholas of Cusa's (1996) dialogue earlier. Like the layman, however, Eastern thought has always been skeptical or suspicious of the capacity of rational analysis in particular, and of language in general, to convey the essence of the human condition. As the sinologist A. C. Graham observed in his study of Chinese thought and practice, "Reason is for questions of means; for your ends in life listen to aphorism, examples, parable, and poetry" (Graham, 1989, p. 7). This deep suspicion of logic, language, and formal knowledge claims in important matters of life is well captured in the work of the contemporary Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, who observed, "There is a deep-seated awareness of the incompetence of utterance as the mode of man's being" in Eastern thought (Nishitani, 1982, p. 31). For the Eastern mind, ultimate reality cannot be captured or represented linguistically; it is essentially "nameless" or "unnameable" and can be alluded to obliquely only through paradoxical utterances. Thus, the very first lines of the *Tao Te Ching,* arguably the most influential ancient Chinese text, read, "The Tao that can be named is not the eternal *Tao,* the name that can be named is not the eternal name" (cited in Chan, 1963, p. 139). For this reason, communication of thought in the East is often indirect, suggestive, and symbolic; words are used loosely and treated as mere pointers to what lies

beyond the realms of intellection. As the Buddhist monk Kao-seng Chuan put it, "Symbols are to express ideas. When ideas have been understood, symbols should be forgotten. Words are to interpret thoughts. When thoughts have been absorbed, words stop. . . . Only those who can take the fish and forget the net are worthy to seek the truth" (cited in Chang, 1963, p. 43).

In matters of deep comprehension, one must be able to grasp the absolute not through words or language but rather by an unmediated act of pure intuition. The idealist philosopher Georg Hegel noted that for the Chinese this absolute "origin of things is nothingness, emptiness, the altogether undetermined, the abstract universal, and this is also called *Tao*" (Hegel, 1932/1955, Vol. 1, p. 125). What unites and underpins the forms of knowledge in Western thinking is the belief in the primacy of "being"—form, substance, essence, fullness, completeness, coherence, and finality. For the East, however, it is *nothingness, emptiness, and the undetermined that are the fecund progenerative origin—the source of potentiality for all things.* Herein lies the fundamental difference between the East and the modern West and, hence, the differently nuanced appreciation of what wisdom entails.

Eastern philosophies advocate the negation and "removal of the immediate and overpowering face of reality," considering this to be "a necessary condition for what is really real to appear" (van Bragt, 1982, pp. xxv–xxvi). Whereas the West emphasizes "filling in" the "gaps," whether they be the cup of knowledge, the empty pages of a book, the blank spaces on a canvas (in the case of painting), the aural void created by silence, the relations between people, or the unwieldy chaos residing between or surrounding instructions, the East is incessantly preoccupied with "emptying out" thought and purifying experience; the search for wisdom is the search for *absolute nothingness*—that ultimate reality unmediated by the intellect. The East seeks to attain what the Japanese industrialist Konosuke Matsushita called a *sunao* mind:

> A person with this mind looks at things as they are at that moment and colors them with no special bias, emotionalism, or preconception. . . . He is open to experience them as they are. . . . Zen training, with its austere life-style and stress on meditation, seeks to free the mind from material concerns and personal prejudices, and in this sense the Zen mind bears a certain resemblance to the *sunao* mind. (Matsushita, 1978, pp. 63–65)

The Japanese term *sunao,* properly translated, means simplicity, humility, and docility in the face of truth; it is a disciplined objectivity that is radically different from the objectivist epistemology of empiricism.

James (1912/1996) attempted to formulate just such a methodological principle in his program of *radical empiricism,* where he insisted on the foundational importance of "pure experience" as the cornerstone of his philosophy. What Zen Buddhism strives toward and what Matsushita called a *sunao* mind, James called "pure experience"—that aboriginal concrete

flow of sensations appearing in all its "much-at-onceness." Similarly, the Victorian art critic John Ruskin coined the phrase "innocence of the eye" (Ruskin, 1927, Vol. 4, p. 27) to refer to the attainment of this pure preconceptual apprehension of phenomena (Chia, 2003). Yet, for the most part, the dominant tendency in the contemporary West remains to "fill in" and "complete" through learning rather than to "empty out" or unlearn. For the East, however, *absolute nothingness* is the final ground out of which issues something and nothing, existence and essence. It is the "lining of the kimono, known only by the very way in which the kimono hangs and holds its shape. One sees the lining by not seeing it. . . . This is the form of the formless" (Carter, 1990, p. 98).

The common tenet uniting what we might loosely call the "East," therefore, is an unequivocal rejection of the competency of logic, language, and utterance for expressing the dominant mode of man's being. For this reason, all arenas of life in the East, including the arts, sports, pastimes, and business, are viewed as avenues for purifying thought and for attaining that ultimate experience of reality. As the Zen master D. T. Suzuki observed,

> One of the most significant features we notice in the arts as they are studied in Japan, and probably also all other Far Eastern countries, is that they are not intended for utilitarian purposes only or pure aesthetic enjoyment, but are meant to train the mind . . . to bring it into contact with the ultimate reality. (cited in Herrigel, 1953/1985, p. 5)

The rigorous, disciplined, and nearly obsessive perfecting of action in all aspects of artistic performance, whether it be calligraphy, martial arts, flower arrangement, origami, the tea pouring ceremony, or indeed even practical activities such as sports and business (e.g., the Japanese and Koreans are obsessed with golf even though most of their actual golfing takes place at driving ranges and hardly ever on golf courses!), is viewed as a potential avenue that leads to attainment of that ever-elusive singular moment of pure spontaneous and flawless action. In archery, for example, it is that moment of perfection when "Bow, arrow, goal, and ego all melt into one another, so that I can no longer separate them. And even the need to separate has gone. For, as soon as I take the bow and shoot, everything becomes so clear and straightforward and so ridiculously simple" (Herrigel, 1953/1985, p. 86). This pure and spontaneous unfolding of action describes that magical moment when great works of art, flawless performances, and accomplishments—as well as timeless events—take place, when all mediation of words and knowledge is rendered irrelevant, and when the immersion of the self into a seamless flow of action is all there is (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The existential urge to grasp this ultimate "form of the formless and hear the sound of the soundless" (Shimomura, 1960, p. 211) lies at the heart of all Eastern culture.

In summary, whereas the dominant Western representationalist worldview seeks to attain the ultimate fullness of "form," "being," "substance,"

"presence," "perfection," "mastery," "distinctiveness," and "control," and hence to orient itself toward learning and mastery of circumstance, Chinese thought in particular, and Eastern thought in general, finds solace in absolute emptiness, stillness, silence, nothingness, undifferentiatedness, and formlessness. In short, the importance of "unlearning" and "emptying out" traditionally have been associated with insight and wisdom in the East since time immemorial.

Wisdom and Performative Extravagance in Organizations

Much of this talk of absolute nothingness, emptiness, unlearning, and Zen-like naïveté might appear somewhat askance to the world of business in which managerial and organizational performance is comprehended in familiar terms such as assets, profits, and increased shareholder value and is evaluated by market judgments on the basis of economic exchange and deliberate rational calculation. According to this dominant "free market" scheme of things, goods and services are produced with a view to achieving a maximum exchange value that is necessarily determined by its reception in the market. The market acts as arbiter and ensures a kind of "allocative efficiency" for the product or service being provided. Such a *restricted* conception of economic exchange, however, does not exhaust the possibilities for explaining the underlying motivation behind outstanding individual and organizational performances. It overlooks a deeper and more fundamental human urge driving performative action—the need for self-transformation and self-realization. An organizationally "wise" viewpoint appreciates the existence of another more fundamental logic of commerce at work—an "X-efficiency" (Wada, 1997) or "immaculate commerce" (Derrida, 1981, p. 9) that accounts for the genuine achievements and outstanding breakthroughs taking place within organizational contexts. Such spontaneous and uncalculated outpourings of offerings that we are occasionally privileged to witness and savor surprises and astounds us, filling us with pleasurable experiences.

In art, drama, musical performances, and even sports and business, for instance, there are at times an inexplicable level of productivity and performance attained that goes far beyond that justifiable by any form of restricted economic explanation in that what is actually given, displayed, or offered far exceeds what is anticipated, expected, or even hoped for. These are experiences, events, and performances that literally take our breath away. Such rare moments of *performative extravagance* (what we more trivially in common parlance call "delighting the customer")—truly path-breaking spectacular displays—are what we really mean by the now overused rhetoric of "excellence." In sports, it may come in the form of a world record-breaking Bob Beamon long jump, a miraculous Tiger Woods escape shot, or an audacious goal attempt by the Brazilian soccer-playing

genius Ronaldinho. In art and music, it produces those masterpieces to which we return again and again in awe and appreciation. In business, we talk about the legendary "miraculous" corporate turnarounds achieved against overwhelming odds, those new product innovations in which dreams and ideas predominate and become nearly an obsession rather than a commercial venture, inspired performances by otherwise "mediocre employees," and the critical breakthroughs achieved in terms of novel forms of engagement. All of these exemplify what we mean by personally developing wisdom in practice—a performative extravagance that reflects the continual and relentless search for perfection in action *for its own sake*.

One area in which this performative extravagance is readily displayed is genuine entrepreneurial ventures where the primary object of entrepreneurial activity is not so much to make profit as it is to disclose new possibilities and transform our lifeworlds in some significant way (Spinosa, Flores, & Dreyfus, 1997, p. 51). The entrepreneur adopts a "strange poise" (Lichtenberg, 2000, p. D30) offering unconditionally and without any anticipation of reward or return some novel insight, service, or implement that radically reconfigures settled patterns of social activity and/or lifestyle. This is the argument made by the political economist George Gilder, who maintained that, contrary to commonly held views, contemporary capitalism is no less animated by the spirit of the "gift" than are the primitive tribes studied by Marcel Mauss. For Gilder, the capitalistic enterprise is a more elaborate form of *potlatch*—the primitive practice of giving *extravagantly* without the utilitarian expectation of exact, materially equivalent return. The expectation is open-ended in that the would-be entrepreneur needs to invest in and supply goods and services without ever being sure whether he or she will achieve any adequate return for the effort. Here the circulation of exchange is governed less by an invisible hand than by what Mauss called a generous and conspicuous hand of demonstration where reciprocity is wrapped within a complex system of symbolic status and deferred expectations and where what is traded is not simply goods and services but also identities, trust, and relationships (Mauss, 1950/2002, p. 93). Whereas Mauss studied tribes and historical texts (including the Vedic fragments of the Brahmins with their "Eastern" eschewal of simple egoism), Gilder studied entrepreneurs, arguing, "The unending offerings of entrepreneurs, investing jobs, accumulating inventories—all long before any return is received, all without any assurance that the enterprise will not fail—constitute a pattern of giving that *dwarfs in extent and in essential generosity any primitive rite of exchange*" (Gilder, 1981, p. 30, italics added). It is precisely because capitalism is grounded in this irrational attitude of "giving without prior assurance," and of giving more than is expected by the extensive knowledge of market-based exchange, that it can be said to be truly wealth creating and, hence, invaluable to the commonwealth.

This idea of performative extravagance more aptly describes how the inventor James Dyson designed the bagless vacuum cleaner (Muranka &

Rootes, 1996). Frustrated by the bag clogging in his own traditional vacuum cleaner, his response was not to get a new bag, or to search for a replacement, but rather to consider possible alternatives to the fundamental design. He immersed himself for 5 years not only with more than 5,000 prototypes but also with the practices of manufacturing and house cleaning (e.g., sensory relationships [sight, touch, and sound] with floor care tools). Moreover, he learned from, and was inspired by, other designs and designers who constantly questioned things—whose disposition and orientation meant that they were always looking to relate themselves to objects differently. (Examples include Alex Moulton's bicycle, which pioneered using small wheels [quick acceleration] and a cruciform frame [lighter and less obtrusive], and Buckminster-Fuller's geodesic domes, which were built as alternate forms of shelter using light, readily available material held in tension rather than depleting heavy materials held under compression.) What inspired these alternate designs was the ability to *unlearn* standard constraints—to become naive and *ignorant of orthodoxy* and so to redesign the fundamentals of what is considered a typical bike, building, or (in Dyson's case) vacuum cleaner. The machine Dyson finally developed still cleaned floors, but it also became an aesthetic object (various models are housed in places such as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Pompidou Centre in Paris) and one that delivered health benefits (the suction system filtered microparticles linked to respiratory illnesses such as asthma). It was no longer simply about keeping a house spick-and-span. The final designed output exceeded its pure functional role because it exemplified an *extravagant* outpouring of effort—a dogged expression at pushing at the bounds of what is possible.

Explaining the underlying motivation for this spontaneous outpouring of performative extravagance requires a different logical take from that of the restricted economics of exchange. Derrida (1981) argued that all such outstanding achievements constitute a "pure productivity of the inexchangeable" (p. 9). They issue from a nearly obsessive compulsion to seek that ultimate "formless" form unreached and unreachable by the restricted logic of economic calculation. Like the relentless pursuit of the art of archery, calligraphy, tea making, or origami, genuine entrepreneurial endeavors pursue that Quixotic "impossible dream" for absolute perfection well encapsulated in a recent Honda television advertisement. Such a Quixotic imperative was well understood by Ruskin (1927), who put it forcefully and without compromise:

> The first and absolute condition of the thing's ever becoming saleable is, that we shall make it without wanting to sell it; nay, rather with a determination not to sell it at any price, if once we get hold of it. Try making your Art popular, cheap—a fair article for your foreign trade; and the foreign market will always show something better. But make it only to please yourselves, and ever be resolved that you won't let

> anybody else have it; and forthwith you will find everybody else wants it. . . . Art has only been produced by nations who rejoiced in it; fed themselves with it, as if it were bread; basked in it, as if it were sunshine; shouted at the sight of it; danced with the delight of it; quarrelled for it; fought for it; starved for it; did, in fact precisely the opposite with it of what we want to do with it. (Vol. 16, p. 184)

In other words, paradoxically, the more we act in terms of anticipated outcomes according to what James March called a "consequentialist theology" (March, 1996), the more likely we are to produce conformity and mediocrity in performance. The more we crave public acceptance, recognition, and material achievement, the less we are able to produce great works that withstand the test of time. This is the paradox of performance.

This idea of a performative extravagance uncorrupted by exchange valuations constitutes a wisdom-of-practice that remains prevalent in many outstanding Western corporations whose reputations and brands reflect their uncompromising search for achieving perfection in their respective sectors. They ooze quality, distinction, and style. This very same attitude persists in the traditional East, and it was this awareness that prompted Matsushita to insist on the importance of attaining that *sunao* mind in business matters. The interminable search for perfection provides the existential impetus for ceaseless innovation, entrepreneurialism, and the attitude of "continuous improvement" (*kaizen,* which actually means relentless *self-criticism*) with which the Japanese are often credited. This attitude is well exemplified by Sony Corporation, one of the world's most successful companies with worldwide sales in excess of U.S. $64 billion; more important, Sony is globally admired for its record of creativity and innovation. Like those values espoused by Matsushita, who insisted that providing a valuable public service (not making a profit) is the foundational aim of a business, Sony adopts a *potlatch* attitude toward product innovation—as a spontaneous "gift" or offering to the public that cannot be predetermined in terms of its reception in the market. It is not a rational target to which a company can aspire. What is emphasized is the need for offering "lavishly"—for a certain kind of extravagance toward the public. For Sony, as Paul Kunkel observed in *Digital Dreams* (Kunkel, 2000), innovations is the first nonnegotiable goal, with the second being to lead and never follow. Sony's strategy has always been to stay one step ahead of the public's imagination. The greatest successes, such as the Walkman, have come from products for which there was no initially proven demand. This uncompromising attitude echoes Ruskin's insistence on "selfishly" seeking perfection regardless of popular public opinion. This is what helps to account for the remarkable achievements of Sony over the years—pocket radios, Sony Betamax, the Trinitron, the Walkman, and the Mavica camera, to name just a few. Yet underpinning all of this is the importance of *ignorance of orthodoxy* and the unlearning necessarily associated with it. We return

once again to the profound notion of wisdom as *learned ignorance*—a deeply sensitized, yet intellectually naive and open-minded, state of being.

Practical Implications: On Not Eating the Menu

The Tao that can be named is not *the TAO.*

—Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

In the world of business, the busy management practitioner is bombarded with catchwords, management fads, and the jargon of business academics—just-in-time, business process reengineering, best practice, benchmarking, balanced scorecards, intellectual harvesting, knowledge mapping, virtual teams, leveraging, supply chains, and the like. These serve only to mesmerize the "humble" lay practitioner who is preoccupied primarily with delivering a quality product or service, a reasonable return on investment, and the security of jobs for his or her employees. There is an insidious process in operation where more and more catchwords and glib phrases (what the postmodernists call endless "regimes of signifiers") come to dominate management discourse and to colonize thought processes, so much so that it becomes nearly impossible to distinguish between what is real and what is fleeting imagery or illusion. To recall one of Rene Magritte's surrealist provocations, we forget to recognize the difference between a pipe and an image of a pipe. Hence, today we all are more prone to "eat the menu" rather than the dish and to "mistake the map for the territory," making our decisions on the basis of circulating opinions, sound bites, and "authoritative" representations rather than on assiduously immersing ourselves and dwelling in the totality of the experience itself. In a telling critique of this modern situation of images and impressions, Mitroff and Bennis (1993) wrote some years ago of what they called the "Unreality Industry" and what it was doing to our modern lives. Nor is the problem simply restricted to these management fads and fashion and business-speak that often overwhelm the lay practitioner. The root problem remains the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness"—that overwhelming modern tendency to mistake abstract representation for concrete reality. In the contemporary global situation of geographical dispersion, cultural diversity, Internet communication, and decontextualized information sharing, this reliance on representations of reality for decisional purposes is even more pervasive and acute in organizations. More and more, abstract representations—e-mails, reports, computer-generated statistics, remote-monitoring processes, performance indicators, charts, and trend analyses—provide the essential basis for important decision making. Swamped with such informational overload, invaded

by the jargon of business-speak, piled with analyses upon analyses, advised by advisers who are increasingly concerned with protecting themselves against the consequences of their own advice and who are often culturally unaware of local customs, and pressured by shareholders and other influential constituencies, it is hard for the organizational leader not to adopt such abstracted and opinionated responses to emerging problem situations.

If it becomes nearly impossible to sort out facts from opinions, and if multiple perspectives are all that we have, how can organizational leaders be confident of the "rightness" of their decisions? The answer may perhaps lie in striving to attain that *sunao* mind—to penetrate these representational abstractions and achieve that pristine *seeing* that apprehends the world without the need for *thematizing* it. This "pure seeing" is a cultivated capacity to simply bear mute witness to happenings in the pristine world in all its "blooming, buzzing confusion," soaking in happenings without the "haste of wanting to act." Possession of this "innocence of the eye" entails the long and arduous cultivation of a deep sensitivity and empathetic appreciation of the totality of a phenomenon in all its interrelated complexity. This is what then allows long-reaching quality decisions to be made. The importance of this pure seeing is well encapsulated in Ruskin's (1985) prophetic words that captured the imagination of a young Mahatma Gandhi and inspired him in his quest for humanity: "Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. . . . To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion" (p. 12).

What are the implications of this importance of pure seeing for organizational leadership in a world awash with representational distractions? For one, it demands of organizational leaders the constant need to be genuinely immersed and "in touch" with the mundane practical goings-on within their own organizational ranks. Given the enormous demand for attention on the part of organizational leaders, it is easy to be seduced by impressive statistics, glossy reports, media coverage, pie charts, and other forms of representational abstractions. The shock comes when organizational leaders begin to immerse themselves in the "underbelly" of everyday organizational life—in trying to understand what Goffee and Jones (2004) called the importance of a relational nonhierarchical *engagement* with others. In Britain recently, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) ran a very successful documentary program titled *Back to the Shop Floor*. In this program, chief executive officers (CEOs) of large organizations were invited to spend a week working alongside their own employees. For example, the chairman of a hotel chain spent a week working as a bellhop, alongside the chambermaid, and as a waiter. In nearly all instances, the shock and disbelief of what went on within their own organizations, contrary to the representations fed to them by their reports, forced a radical rethinking of their organizational policies. They were confronted with *ignorance of their ignorance*. In nearly all of the cases, dramatic policy changes were initiated once these CEOs returned to their boardrooms after the trauma of their "hands-on" experience. If there is one simple

message, what the management guru Tom Peters once advocated—"management by wandering around" (MBWA)—remains even more urgent today. Only by wandering around, with intellectual naïveté and *learned ignorance,* can organizational leaders truly *see* for themselves what their priorities are or ought to be in decisional terms. It is this seeing more clearly that equates with what Jim Collins called the seed of Level 5 leadership—the ability to subjugate the ego to the totality of the organization, that is, to recognize the vital importance of humility in transforming a company from good to great (Collins, 2005). Leadership is not just about resolve, confidence, and clear vision brought through knowledge; it is also about having the calm modesty to recognize the limits of one's own knowledge and, from such learned ignorance, to channel the endeavor for the enduring achievement of the organization as a whole.

Conclusion

We have argued that wisdom is best attained in practice and not in book learning—as a form of *learned ignorance,* where unlearning takes priority over learning and where "purifying" and "weaning" ourselves off of codified knowledge and symbolic representations is a vital step toward genuine enlightened practice and performance. Socrates never wrote, as some have rightly observed, yet he remains a powerful invisible force in our modern consciousness. Socrates's acknowledgment of his ignorance paradoxically reveals a profound wisdom. Such subliminal understanding, and consequently suspicion of formal book learning, creates a deep tension and paradox for a "handbook" such as this that purports to provide valuable insights into organizational and managerial wisdom. More specifically, it creates an internal contradiction regarding the status of the claims about wisdom made here in this chapter! Like the paradox of the Cretan liar, here we are writing in book form about wisdom when what we claim is that wisdom is to be found not in learned books such as this but rather in practice in the hurly-burly of life. What is to be made of this tension of opposites that is well encapsulated in the *written* text of the *Tao Te Ching:* "He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know" (cited in Chan, 1963, p. 166)? The answer might be to take words in general, and written words in particular, more lightly—to treat explanations, theories, and concepts not as strong truth-telling claims but rather as usable but disposable notions to be thrown away once they have outworn their use, much like Wittgenstein's ladder. In his earlier writings, Wittgenstein attempted to articulate and defend a picture theory of truth (i.e., epistemological representationalism), but he soon came to realize the patent impossibility of justifying just such a claim. He therefore suggested that we consider such theoretical attempts as "ladders" that we use to get us up to a higher level of understanding, after which they could be discarded because we no longer needed them. In so

doing, so we begin to loosen the hold that representationalism has on us; we begin to question theories, concepts, and categories not in terms of their method or robustness but rather in terms of our reliance on theories per se as the only way of understanding our experiences. That way, we can take the fish, throw away the net, and move on. The problem is not that theories, concepts, and ideas are themselves problematic per se; rather, the problem is our tendency to cling on to them rigidly and uncritically. When we begin to realize that wisdom is that elusive fish and not the net/work of words/writings/theories we rely on, we become more willing to *unlearn* and to *relearn* and to realize that this process is an interminable one—yet one that sets us on the path to wisdom. We are then more prepared to embrace ignorance as an ally rather than as a foe to be defeated. This is something that comes more instinctively to the untutored and "unschooled" layman.

Attaining this wisdom-in-practice is what enables entrepreneurs, designers, and business leaders to offer the kind of *performative extravagance* that opens up new avenues for self-expression, thereby adding real value and richness to our lives. Entrepreneurs and astute organizational leaders are often acutely aware of the limits and constraints of representational knowledge, and it is this deep awareness of an inherent ambiguity—an emptiness—that prompts the entrepreneur or organizational leader to look to disclosing new relations with others and things. Without this sense of ambiguity there is no doubt, and without doubt there is no willingness to unlearn and, hence, no capacity for learning. To differentiate wisdom from knowledge, understanding, or vision is to recognize it as that form of human awareness that to which the wise are particularly attuned—how indecisiveness can arise from within established patterns of meaning, how different meanings can arise from similar statements or states of affairs, and how efforts at establishing certainty in meaning are precariously legitimized. Whereas knowledge deals in material finitude and belief in immaterial infinity, wisdom occupies what we might call the fertile hinterland between spirit and matter, mind and body, and heaven and Earth. It slips easily between them, retaining that "strange poise"—an echo, a reminder of a basic wonder/wander that drives human endeavors and that itself can be lost in the habitual urge to intellectually define performance in terms of known goals. What we suggest is that without wisdom we end up simply with tallies and scores and little appreciation for the struggles, the creativity, the meaning, and the sheer human endeavors that have brought about our current worldly possibilities.

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