

# The Opening of the Western Mind

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We are not alone in seeing the possibility of a new path leading us out of the crises and breakdowns we are now facing. There are many signs that a major shift in consciousness is already under way, pointing to what we might call the opening of the western mind.

Provoked by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Willis Harman, and lately, the extraordinary ideas of Ken Wilber, a new brand of thinking is emerging. This trend is starting to openly reject rationalism's characteristic reductionism, opposing its inherent homogenizing tendencies by seeking to restore to human experience some of its richness, variety, depth, and multiplicity. These ideas represent, in many ways, the first serious challenge that rationalistic thinking has faced since the death of Socrates.

Elsewhere, other large cracks are beginning to appear in the facade of western culture. Many people now are beginning to turn elsewhere, opening themselves to the rich spiritual traditions of the East, especially Buddhism and Hinduism. Similarly, the East has also become a source of inspiration for broadening the understanding of health, healing, and medicine.

The last three decades have also witnessed the rise of two movements that are without precedent. Following the radical critiques of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and a host of others, feminists have successfully denounced the repression of the feminine archetype that has pervaded practically all cultures for the last five thousand years. As the philosopher Richard Tarnas points out in the epilogue to his magisterial work, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, the crisis of the modern mind has resulted largely from more than two millennia of essentially masculine thinking, beginning with Socrates, and continuing down the ages through Augustine, Aquinas, Copernicus, Descartes, Kant, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and a host of twentieth century physicists, chemists, and biologists. Now, Tarnas suggests, there are many signs of the emergence of more feminine-oriented values and forms of thought.

Prominent among these are a new focus on gender issues in colleges and universities; greater emphasis on intuition and creativity in business, as more and more women move into the workplace, and the growing discourses relating to the Gaia hypothesis and the feminine aspects of the Deity (goddess).

Tarnas suggests that we are in fact moving into a tremendously significant period of initiation. In addition to the turn towards ying values, we see a renewed interest in archetypal forces that transcend scientific reductionism, particularly in the renewed importance that we are giving to the great mother archetype.

A similar tectonic shift, initiated by Rachel Carson and given an extraordinary boost by the pictures of Earth taken from outer space, has also taken place in our whole orientation towards nature. There are also changes currently at work whose effects we can at present only guess at, such as the connecting up of millions of people via the Internet, a technology-driven development without precedent in the history of humankind.

Like any birth, this shift to more openness can be painful at first, but we should not allow ourselves to fall into a mood of hopelessness. We must be courageous. We cannot necessarily tell where all this is leading. Like Jonah, that great Biblical exemplar of transformation, we are now in the belly of the whale, unsure of just where we will end up, and we need to have faith that, caught up in a series of

unfolding developments over which we have little direct control, we are at least moving in the right direction.

## **A New Path**

If there is one overarching way to describe the global process of transformation now underway, it is perhaps to suggest that we are now witnessing the emergence of a new discourse, or set of discourses, grounded in the integration of Eastern and Western ontologies. Traditionally, Eastern thinking and practice has centered on pursuing wisdom and the art of living through contemplation, meditation, closeness to nature, and more generally, a mystical approach to consciousness aimed ultimately at merging with the Absolute.

In the West, we have for centuries focused on separating ourselves from the world, accumulating knowledge for the sake of better understanding and exploiting its resources (including what in the business world, we now call human resources). This has been carried out using rationalistic/scientific modes of thinking that have proved extraordinarily powerful in accomplishing this task.

Our foregoing critique of Western thinking is not intended in any way as an outright rejection. That would be absurd. Rather, we prefer to adopt the move advocated by Ken Wilber of including and transcending current modes of thought and practice. What we are aiming for here is to achieve a better balance by integrating the Eastern emphasis on contemplation and merging with the West's focus on analytical understanding and effective action. Such integration would overcome the historical but unnecessary antagonism between these two diverging paths, taking hold of the best of each tradition.

To be more precise, what we are proposing here is recognition that the process of fusion and separation constitutes the dynamic aspect of what it is to be human in this world. When we merge, we connect, but the very nature of fusing means that we are often unaware of the intrinsic nature of the connection. Correspondingly, when we become observers, we step away from the world for the sake of understanding and of generating effective action. In the end, leading a satisfying life and committing ourselves in service to producing a better world in which the crises we now face can begin to be resolved successfully, requires that we master both dimensions of this dynamic. We need to bring them into balance, while at the same time acknowledging the mystery that ultimately underlies them both.

## **A New Grounding for Learning**

What we are attempting here, (and what our own 'network' of Newfield alumni is aiming for), is to establish a new foundation for learning. Clearly, if we are to move ahead along the path we are suggesting, we will need to provide a bridge into this future.

An absolutely essential part of that bridge is a new discourse on learning. The inadequacy of the present discourse is surely obvious enough. The crisis in education, with the majority of students being turned off by schooling, is rooted in teaching practices that deal primarily with the transfer of information without regard to its value for the art of living. Similarly, the one dimensionality of training is concerned almost exclusively with repetition for the sake of achieving task-specific competence.

What is missing here, of course, is the acknowledgement that the observer is an integral part of what is being observed, of what is being learned. For us, ontological coaching recognizes that in order to produce new possibilities for action, we need to pay attention to and begin to shift our awareness of who we are as observers.