**Homo Sapiens? How do we do this?**

**Simon Fraser University President’s Faculty Lecture**

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Amongst the wise, there is this general sense that if you are wise, you don’t talk about wisdom. The virtue of humility and modesty seems to be part of the profile of a wise person. And more seriously, just talking about something rather than enacting it is also a sure sign of lacking wisdom. On both accounts, then, I am risking myself today with appearing foolish. That risk aside, I am genuinely troubled by the taxonomic name that our species bears: *homo sapiens*, ‘wise man’ or ‘knowing man’. Apparently, we as a subspecies even bear the double distinction of being *homo sapiens sapiens*. That is the proper taxanomic label for us, my anthropologist colleague tells me. Twice wise? Or twice deluded? I think the most positive take on this somewhat embarrassing situation is to see our taxonomic label as an invitation to grow up and grow into the humanity’s potential. My paper is an attempt to understand the humanity’s probable growth arrest, and to stimulate the move forward. First, let’s see what’s going on with our species.

How can we call our species ‘wise’ and ‘knowing’ when the following facts from the contemporary world stare at us? I find myself sinking into despair every time I encounter facts of this nature about our species.

1. Our species spends far more money on military activities than on educating our next generation.
2. Our species spends far more money on smoking and drinking than on educating our next generation.[[1]](#footnote-1)
3. Our species spends far more money on advertising and entertainment than on educating our next generation. (More than $500 billion a year is spent on advertising worldwide.)

If an alien anthropologist were to study *homo sapiens sapiens* and pay attention to various facts, such as the above, I doubt very much that they would characterize us as a whole a wise species. Our brilliant species seems to be, yes, very intelligent but wise? Not when the current humanity seems to be heading in the direction of making the headline in the galaxy newsletter: “*homo sapiens sapiens*, an Earth planet species, highly intelligent, technologically advanced, itself gone extinct after killing most of the life forms on the planet.” From researching daily newspapers around the globe, the alien anthropologist will find, I’m afraid, that our species are very interested in killing each other and other species to the point of nearly destroying our home planet, and daily deluding and hallucinating, and pretending, seducing, and deceiving. Are these activities what a wise species would undertake?

In using the monetary gauge as above, I am not suggesting that money is the sole, let alone the best, measure of human value. Rather, the point I want to make here is that even by the current value system whose singular measure is money, our species seems to be most concerned and engaged with self and other destruction and distraction.

So, we are unwise, but does that bother us? Apparently not. We in modern west seem to have dismissed wisdom as something that we should be seeking after and striving for in any serious manner. Otherwise we would see ‘wisdom’ being mentioned in the mission and vision statements of all institutions of learning. Institutions that I have come across in North America—ones that are considered reputable and respected—have not included ‘wisdom’ as aims of education. We don’t even talk about it in any serious way, especially in the academy. We tend to dismiss it, as if it is on par with phlogiston and fairy dust. In contrast, we talk a lot about intelligence and smartness, about information and knowledge. We are so intelligent that we can devise, and have devised, weapons and instruments of mass destruction and distraction. We can, with astonishing proficiency and efficiency, kill tens and thousands, if not millions, of people in one day; we can destroy hundreds and hundreds of hectors of rainforest in one day with our machines and explosives.

It is very telling that we could say that so and so cheated, murdered, destroyed, and so on, and he is very intelligent. So, intelligence, as we understand it, is separate from such dispositions as caring, loving, empathy, compassion, and responsibility! We also think of intelligence as separate from action since we say things like, “So and so is very intelligent but she does not do anything with it. She cannot look after anyone, let alone herself.” Indeed, we have seen people, who we call intelligent or smart, making poor life decisions, and wrecking havoc and bringing ruin upon themselves and others. We can extend this observation to our species as a whole. We are a very intelligent, apparently the smartest, species on the planet, but this capacity, as we currently and conventionally understand it, does not seem to give rise to taking right actions in the service of mutual well-being.

What is also astonishing to me is that, given this very narrow meaning of ‘intelligence’ and ‘smartness’, we should be so obsessed with it, and pursue increasing intelligence as one of the most important, if not the main, aims of education at all levels. In fact, the ‘higher’ we go up on the ladder of education, the more single-mindedly focused we seem to be on this limited notion of intelligence. It is true that there have been some vigorous pushbacks in the last few decades for redefining intelligence so that it includes capacities and measures other than logical, critical, abstract, rational thinking, such as emotional intelligence, social intelligence, environmental intelligence, and even, moral intelligence and existential intelligence (e.g., Howard Gardener, Daniel Goleman). Also, there have been many scholars and thinkers, notably from the feminist, post-colonialist, Indigenous scholarships, and new cognitivist camps, who have been opening our eyes to different ways of knowing, and hence, different conceptions of knowledge. These pushes are all in the right direction, I say. Shall we then keep adding new dimensions of intelligence until we have a comprehensive accounting of intelligence? How many more?

As I think of what more dimensions we need to add to more fully and truthfully capture and represent human intelligence, I am suddenly reminded of this Zen story:

A Cup of Tea

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868–1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. “It is overfull. No more will go in!”

“Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?” (Senzaki and Reps 1957, 19)

If intelligence has to do with what goes into the cup, perhaps wisdom has to do with the empty cup, or more accurately, the emptiness of the cup. Like the cup, wisdom holds, nourishes, and supports everything so that the end result would be all round flourishing. In other words, we know wisdom by how it supports individual and collective flourishing. It is important to emphasize that, given the ecological principle of interdependence operating in our phenomenal world, this flourishing that wisdom supports has to be for the whole biotic communities. But, how does wisdom support human and other beings? I propose that we look at what’s missing from the conventional notion of intelligence, and see if what is missing is in this notion is central to the notion of wisdom.

While I support the researchers adding more dimensions to intelligence so as to demonstrate that our smartness is not just in one area of understanding and competency, I think something is radically missing from this quest. What is missing? I am not talking about another type of intelligence to add to the existing categories of intelligence. I leave that task, which is worthy in and of itself, to other researchers versed in empirical research goals and methods. My sense is that there is something else about human beings that this quest for intelligence does not get at, no matter how comprehensive and complete. The quest for human intelligence, as it is framed, is for what is knowable, seen, measurable, discrete, and predictable. This view of human intelligence is part and parcel of the empiricist worldview. As far as I can tell, the whole human intelligence discourse is tightly bound up with the empiricist worldview and values of modernity that make a number of epistemic and axiological assumptions about what human beings are like.

The empiricist worldview does not include and attend to the unknowable, unnamable, unseen, immeasurable, and unpredictable. Human beings do know a lot, can measure all kinds of things, including various intelligences (as conceptualized and operationalized), and can predict many things with a certain measure of accuracy. So, again, I am not at all discrediting or disregarding the purview of the empirical knowledge. Empirical knowledge is a good thing, and I am grateful for it. Rather, I am pointing to the built-in limitations to our empirical knowledge, and proposing that we make room for and learn to work with what is not and cannot be taken up by our empiricist worldview. What is my justification? What do I suggest that we actually do?

There is a long tradition, in fact, time-hallowed tradition, of wisdom teachings in the world that address, precisely, our important relationship to the unknowable and unknown, unseen, uncertain, immeasurable, innumerable, ineffable, and unpredictable. (From here on, for the sake of brevity and flow, I will use the phrase, ‘the immeasurable’ or ‘the immeasurable and ineffable’, to stand for all of these cognate attributes.) Matters of our relationship to the immeasurable are not the purview of the empiricist knowledge, and it’s right to acknowledge that. The beginning of wisdom is this acknowledgement, and we have no better figure the well-known Socrates. Socrates was famous in stating: “[I]t seems that I am wiser than [the person who is said to be wise] is to this small extent, that I do no think I know what I do not know” (Apology 21d, tr. Tredennick). In other words, for Socrates the essence of wisdom is to know one’s ignorance. But here, the kind of knowledge one could be ignorant of is not the empirical knowledge, like the name of the country south of Canada or the number of planets in solar system. Rather, Socratic ignorance concerns most challenging issues that individual human beings face, such as meaning in one’s life, knowing one’s heart and fathoming another’s ‘soul’, fear of non-being, facing loss and death, facing failures, honouring the dead and the unborn, coping with life’s ongoing afflictions, handling dissatisfactions and disappointments, cultivating gratitude, respect, compassion, generosity, devotion, faith, and so on. Exactitude and certainty of knowledge, measurement of quality, replication of the results, and predictability of outcome, all of which are the domains of the empirical knowledge, do not apply to such existential knowledge, and we need to find different ways to work with these matters of the immeasurable. These different ways are what contemplative approaches and practices are about, and I will come to that later in this paper.

Under the hegemony of empiricism, these matters of the immeasurable have been either dismissed out of hand as irrelevant or fuzzy and touchy-feely, or they have been objectified and operationalized, and turned them into some kind of measurable and even predictable phenomena. But the immeasurable does not go away. For instance, our fundamental existential quandaries and angst constantly follow us like our own shadows, even though we may at times delude ourselves that we have gotten rid of them. This kind of delusion abounds in current consumerism in which people mistake, for instance, happiness with products and services that they can purchase to “make them happy.”

It is intriguing to note that the Eastern wisdom traditions such as Buddhist and Daoist philosophies are concerned with our relationships and workings with the immeasurables. The first few lines of Daodejing Chapter One famously states:

The Tao you can tell is not the true Tao. The names you can name are not the true names.  The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth.  The named is the mother of the myriad things.

The historical Buddha himself often resorted to noble silence when pressed into agreeing or disagreeing with questions that are fundamentally unanswerable by human beings. For example: “[W]hen the wanderer Vacchagotta asked: 'is there a Self?' the Buddha made no reply. Then Vacchagotta asked: 'is there then not a Self?' and again the Buddha did not answer. Later when questioned as to his silence by Ananda who was attending on him, he pointed out that if he had said there is a Self, it would be taken as agreeing that the view that there is an Eternal is correct and that if he had said there is no Self it could be taken that the view that all is annihilated would be correct.' (SN Salayatana Snandasutta).” Silence here is not an answer to the question, but it is a wise response aimed at containing the questioner from pursuing an empirical answer to a non-empirical question.

With these two examples (many more can be supplied), what I am pointing to is the overlooked and neglected areas of inquiry and study, namely working with the order of the immeasurable. With the advent of the modern era and the ascendance of empiricist philosophy and sciences, our relationship with the order of the immeasurable has been increasingly attenuated to the point of being a lost cause in formal settings of learning institutions. This is where the wisdom traditions and teachings come in.

Wisdom teachings in various traditions, whether Socratic, Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, etc., all are concerned with essential qualities of life and experience that we cannot pin down, control, measure, replicate and predict. What are such qualities of life as experienced by humans, and how essential are they to our well-being? Suppose your lover tells you that he loves you exactly this much and no more, or that he loves you because you met his criteria of lovableness and measured up to his yardstick of love, would you feel really loved? I would feel humiliated and degraded, wouldn’t you? Suppose your parent told you that you were loved because you did well in school, would you feel deeply and truly loved? I would feel hurt, and as a young child, that hurt will go deep into my body-mind-heart-soul. Suppose your friend says to you that she can only be respectful to you just a little because in her view you don’t quite deserve her full respect. Would you feel respected at all? Suppose your colleague keeps talking about just how generous he has been with all his contributions to the society, would you think that he is really generous?

The moment love, kindness, generosity, and so on, are discursively defined, qualified, quantified, made conditional, measured, calculated, and packaged, they become degraded and lose their spirit and vitality. In their degraded state, they cannot perform the essential work of nourishing our existential core, and enspiriting, ennobling, dignifying, and sanctifying human lives. These qualities belong to the order of the immeasurable, and their gift to us is to render human beings more than objects in a soulless universe. The late Thomas Berry the ecotheologian left with us a memorable line: “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” Exactly: it is the job of the immeasurable to help us commune as subjects. It is through embodying these qualities in our existential cores that we escape objectification of human beings. (INTERLUDE-SEAN/SHAHAR’S PERFORMANCE)

The question of the immeasurable, which the empiricist philosophy and science tend to dismiss or misunderstand, is at the heart of human well-being and suffering. The humanity within us thrives and flourishes when the immeasurable and ineffable is nourished. We knew this as young children. When we felt with our whole being how boundless our parents’ love was for us, we felt secure and strong. When we didn’t feel this, when the love we received was conditioned, measured, and doled out, our existential core shrank and shriveled, leaving a sense of empty hole in the chest. Mark Epstein the psychiatrist and Buddhist meditator spoke of his own experience of walking around with this existential hole felt in the chest when he was a young medical student, and he observed that it was a pervasive experience in the population. My own sense is that only when the essential qualities of humanity are recognized and experienced as boundless, immeasurable, and ineffable within us and embracing us from all seven directions, from the past, present, and the future, that we would feel existentially secure. But the hegemonic ethos of measurement, calculation, instrumentalist thinking saturates our modern empiricist culture and consciousness, making it difficult for us to connect with the order of the immeasurable. Everywhere we go, our hearts, minds, spirits, and bodies most often experience being constricted, blocked, numbed, hardened, and measured. When steadily and massively fed on this ethos of the measurable, we become psychically hungry.

In the Buddhist literature, there is this figure of Hungry Ghost, a human figure with impossibly thin long neck and a needle-like small aperture as mouth and bloated belly. This is how Mark Epstein (1995) depicts Hungry Ghosts:

Phantomlike creatures with withered limbs, grossly bloated bellies, and long thin necks, the Hungry Ghosts in many ways represent a fusion of rage and desire. Tormented by unfulfilled cravings and insatiably demanding of impossible satisfactions, the Hungry Ghosts are searching for gratification for old unfulfilled needs whose time has passed. They are beings who have uncovered a terrible emptiness within themselves, who cannot see the impossibility of correcting something that has already happened. (p. 28)

Hungry ghosts devour everything in sight, and want more and more, but nothing nourishes them, or nothing they eat has the right nourishment, and they are left hungrier than ever. Please look around; and look deeply within. Are we—most of us—not hungry ghosts in this desire-saturated culture of production and consumption (Kaza, 2005)? Has our culture not normalized this hungry-ghost state of being? Isn’t our education system part of the production machinery of hungry ghosts with its pervasive instrumentalist practice of measurement and calculation, and denial or dismissal of our intrinsic nature of human beingness that thrives on the immeasurable and the ineffable?

My concern as educator is that the hegemonic empiricist worldviews and education have little room and tolerance for the immeasurable, ineffable, and invisible, and thus cannot foster sufficiently the essential humanity, to the detriment of our individual and collective well-being. When I look back at most of my published works, I see one major theme running through them all: resistance to pervasive instrumentalism following the objectification of human beings, i.e., turning our selves into measurable units. In 2001, I published a journal article that called for “learning to value the world intrinsically.” It is one of my earliest articulations of the problem with instrumentalism.

My contention in this paper is that the hegemonic worldviews and language of empiricism that has banished, or at least made suspect, the immeasurable, invisible, ineffable, go hand-in-hand with the creation of the today’s instrumentalist world. Hence, to foster intrinsic valuing—the opposite of instrumental valuing--we would need to reclaim the worldviews, language, and experience of the immeasurable and the ineffable. How do we do this? What can we do as educators?

There is a burgeoning movement, both general and educational, in North America that goes under the title of ‘contemplative approaches to learning…’ Currently I am co-editing with three other colleagues a book titled ‘Contemplative Learning and Inquiry Across Disciplines’ that gained an advance contract from SUNY Press. In its Introduction, the editors state:

[C]ontemplative approaches to higher education are beginning to emerge across a wide cross-section of disciplines and fields from the work of scholar-practitioners who are pushing the boundaries of traditional theories and practices of post-secondary instruction and learning. While contemplative practices have been foundational to wisdom traditions throughout various cultural periods, more recently these practices are being re-examined across different context(s) of learning, particularly in mainstream North American institutions of higher education. In the past decade, several academic conferences and a growing educational literature have focused on contemplative approaches to teaching, learning and knowing.

As an example, the following conferences in recent years have either exclusively focused on or featured presentations about contemplative education: Contemplative Pedagogy in Higher Education (Amherst College, May 2003), Contemplative Practices and Education: Making Peace in Ourselves and in the World (Teachers College, 2005), Uncovering the Heart of Higher Education (San Francisco, 2007), Mindful Learners: The Uses of Contemplative Practice in the Classroom (CUNY, 2006), Creativity, Consciousness, and the Academy: Bridging Interior and Exterior Realms of Teaching, Learning, and Research (University of Michigan, 2006), Developmental Issues in Contemplative Education (Garrison Institute, 2008), The Contemplative Heart of Higher Education, First Annual Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (Amherst College, Massachusetts, 2009), and The Contemplative Academy, Second Annual Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education Conference (Amerst College, 2010). In addition to institutions that were founded upon contemplative principles, such as California Institute for Integral Studies, JFK University, Maharishi University, and Naropa University, all of which are accredited up through the graduate level, mainstream institutions such as Brown University and the University of Michigan have implemented contemplative curricula. The Rocky Mountain Contemplative Higher Education Network based in Colorado offers programs for academics interested in contemplative approaches to education as does the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society in Massachusetts, which has hosted annual contemplative retreats for contemplative curriculum development and issued over 130 individual fellowships for $10,000 US academics across North American campuses to develop courses that employ contemplative practices and more recently monthly webinars. Finally, Teacher’s College Record (September, 2006) devoted an entire issue to the topic of contemplative education.

We go on to ask, and then respond: “What signs are we reading in all these burgeoning academic interests and activities around the contemplative ways? How are we reading the world from these phenomena? The world is searching for balance from the unsustainable imbalance of overdoing, overproducing, and overconsuming, in which our North American culture has been mired.” I would add here that the spreading interest in the contemplative consciousness, orientation, pedagogy, and approaches to learning at all levels of institutions of learning is a witness to our *longing to be*: our existential longing to feel secure, loved, dignified, and embraced by the universe in ways that are immeasurable even as we face the immensely challenging world of turbulence and violence. I would further add that this interest in the contemplative provides a counterpoint in creating a balance in our lives that are increasingly out of balance and are falling headlong into instrumentalism.

The essence of contemplative approach to anything is what is known in the field as ‘resting in awareness’. This is truly a most difficult thing to do for us. In a co-authored chapter, we depict what ordinary citizens and students are like:

We rush around frantically, work around the clock, compete relentlessly, and consume and accumulate excessively. Educationally, we are inclined (or forced) to consume knowledge voraciously, often in attempts to pass exams, earn degrees, and land those lucrative career positions. In the language of Erich Fromm (1997), we are preoccupied with the “having” dimension of productivity and accumulation, and ignore the “being” dimension of resting in awareness. Moreover, this ability to sit with/in one’s experience, holding the space for experience to show up and present itself so that we can work with it, is indeed a difficult art to learn. We are usually too reactive, and not spacious and tranquil enough within, to be able to sit with ourselves and observe. Our attention (and energy, too) is constantly drawn out of ourselves and disperses in all directions, and not enough is left with which we can witness and examine our own experience. Heesoon . . . humorously but poignantly characterized the dominant mode of teaching as a “vampire operation”: it continually sucks and drains attention out of students. No wonder students often feel--they tell us--as though the core of their being is hollowed out, empty. Students are not given much opportunity to attend to their inner lives, to explore their unfathomable riches, to plummet the depth, and to be nourished deeply by such engagements. Yet, it is only through such engagements that energetically charged awareness deepens and expands, connecting self with cosmos, and fully reconciling us with life and universe. Hence the motto our group would like to have for our students is: RETURN ATTENTION TO SELF. The self is unable to nourish itself with awareness and energy when its attention is continuously siphoned out: attention is needed to access awareness and embedded and embodied energy. The result of the continual drain of attention while knowledge is being accumulated is that we may be knowledgeable but are not . . . wise.”

Therefore, the first thing we would need to do as contemplative educators is to create a learning environment that is conducive to students’ resting in awareness. Everything we do and say, and our very manner of presence, in class has an effect on how well students may (or may not) rest in awareness. Professor David Geoffrey Smith at University of Alberta, who has been writing extensively about the wisdom traditions distinguishes wisdom from knowledge. He shows that wisdom “requires, as its precondition, the ‘essential unity between thought and emotion,’ and points out that such unity requires the disciplines of mindfulness or contemplative.” Such disciplines have been the integral and central part of various Eastern wisdom traditions. I quote Professor Smith:

In Taoism it involves finding “the still point”; in Buddhism, returning to your “original face”. The practice of Way—and here the key word is practice, as one never quite reaches the goal completely, finally—leads to an awareness of how the smallest details of life play into the largest consequences and effects, and that it is therefore highly important to maintain vigilance over the details of one’s conduct, because how we get to here, today, depends on what happened yesterday, or indeed the moment just passed.

I would like to end this lecture paper with an observation and a question that my co-authors and I posited in our chapter:

The greatest educational challenge today is not downloading more, better, sophisticated knowledge and skills into students but helping them to cultivate the unity of heart and mind (and let’s not forget the embodied nature of this cultivation) through the work of awareness, and bring this unity fully into all contexts of their personal, communal, academic, and professional lives. The challenge is to infuse knowledge with awareness or mindfulness of which love and sensitivity are part, and the result is, in short, wisdom. Can our schools, from kindergarten to university, be institutions of wisdom?

Bai, H. (2012, March 29). *Homo Sapiens? How do we do this?* Simon Fraser University President’s Faculty Lecture, SFU, Burnaby, BC.

1. “The average American spends approximately 7 percent of their income on entertainment, alcohol, and tobacco, while spending only 1.9 percent on education, according to a [**2008 survey**](http://www.visualeconomics.com/how-the-average-us-consumer-spends-their-paycheck/) conducted by the U.S Department of Labor” and “around the world, approximately 103.5 million primary school age children are not enrolled in school, with about 57 percent of these education deprived children being girls”--http://www.globalenvision.org/2011/08/08/too-many-dads-money-going-down-drain. Also 2009 the US budget: National Debt Payment: $10.2 trillion (580 times larger than NASA's budget)

   Department of Defense: $515.4 billion (29.3 times larger than NASA's budget)

   Global War on Terrorism: $189.3 billion (10.8 times larger than NASA's budget)

   Health & Human Services: $68.5 billion (3.9 times larger than NASA's budget)

   Department of Transportation: $63.4 billion (3.6 times larger than NASA's budget)

   Department of Education: $59.2 billion (3.4 times larger than NASA's budget)

   Department of Housing & Urban Development: $38.5 billion (2.2 times larger than NASA's budget)

   Department of Energy: $25.0 billion (1.4 times larger than NASA's budget)

   $586.5 billion on gambling;

   $80 billion on illegal drugs;

   $58 billion on alcohol consumption;

   $31 billion on tobacco products, and;

   $250 billion on the medical treatment for the above related issues

   Additionally, during 2003, Americans also collectively spent:

   $224 billion to eat out;

   $191 billion on personal water craft;

   $67 billion on frozen dinners;

   $25 billion on gardening;

   $22.1 billion on hunting;

   $21.3 billion on extravagant pet products, and;

   $15 billion on junk food snacks

   Read more: <http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_much_money_is_spent_on_space_exploration_each_year#ixzz1oA48r4j4> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)