

Seeking the Seeds of Wisdom amongst the Pauses of the Imaginal [Conference roundtable presentation].

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Abstract

What is contemplative knowing and how is it accessed and experienced? Here, the author takes us on a personal journey, from reductionism towards holism, by inquiring into the realm of art and aesthetics as one powerful pathway. It is at the intersection of art, story and reflection where we may gain access other ways of knowing.

Keywords: contemplative education, imaginal wisdom

My journey into the contemplative sphere is broadly configured by a methodology of self inquiry; and more narrowly configured by two presences. The first presence is that of my narrative. The second one is that of the artful. Together these presences frame the principal reflection of the following paper of how the journey onto the contemplative life, while nested within the summonses of my narrative, is also seeded by the intersection of such necessity with the presence of the imaginal. As I cross onto the terrain of self inquiry, I offer my narrative and encounters with the artful as an exemplar of such intersection.

In beginning to explore this reflection I pose the following question: What characterizes the experience of contemplative knowing? Before I journeyed into holistic education I pondered the question of knowledge as might an analytical epistemologist, but now when I ponder this question it comes with a qualification. If it seems abstract, then I beg your understanding. Because if the question seeks to be present with you today it only does so because it emerges through my narrative. The psychologist Jerome Bruner observes how narrative forges our reality (Bruner, 1991). Bruner's idea is one that I view as foundational to the understanding of the character of knowing (Rossini, 2021). We cannot fully understand its character unless we engage with the imperative of our stories. In a kindred spirit the twentieth century contemplative, Thomas Merton, reflects about how "It is a compelling necessity for me to be free to embrace the necessity of my own nature" (Merton, 1992, p.215).

And thus, if I offer you the abstract question about the character of the moment of knowing it is because the question emerges, following Merton, from the "compelling necessity" of my narrative. That is, as one drawn to the study of philosophy, but whose journey onto its study has transited beyond the analytical tradition of North American philosophy in which I was schooled many years ago. Instead transiting onto another terrain beyond the bifurcated ethos of Cartesian knowing towards a different philosophy of holism and connection.

And thus if I am impelled to ask the question about the moment of knowing, it is because it emerges from my story of philosophies once read but now questioned; and of others which followed which were then unknown but now embraced. My encounters with philosophy form some of the stories which sculpt my becoming; and thus from it emerges my question. Herein, narrative and inquiry interlocked within a necessary relation.

On the nature of contemplation, Thomas Merton, in his text *New Seeds of Contemplation*, reflects upon how:

Contemplation, on the contrary, is the experiential grasp of reality as subjective, not so much "mine" (which would signify "belonging to the external self") but "myself" in existential mystery. Contemplation does not arrive at reality after a process of deduction, but by an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully

alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God. (Merton, 1972, pp. 8-9)

To ask my question is to probe my existential depth, but to probe my existential depth is also the beginning of the contemplative journey; wherein the turn to self inquiry is a turn towards stories which are witness to my becoming. And within the turn to the imperative of our stories is seeded the promise of the contemplative quest.

But my narrative as a philosopher is complicated by the presence of the artful. When I studied philosophy there was no space for the aesthetical, at least in the courses I took. Later when I studied in a faculty of architecture, I was able to engage with the aesthetical, but there was absent the philosophical. There were no artists amongst the philosophers; and no philosophers amongst the architects (Rossini, 2021). My academic transit was a paradoxical one. I had ventured from one terrain to another, but the bridge was missing. I would not be present to the missing connection until I returned to the University of Toronto to do a doctoral thesis informed by a different paradigm of holism and connection a few years ago; when I first read *The Holistic Curriculum* by John Miller (2008) and became fascinated by Tobin Hart's view of contemplative inquiry as "a third way of knowing" (Hart, 2004, p.29).

That is, a way of doing inquiry which stands apart from the bifurcated ethos of empirical and rationalist methodologies dominating understandings of knowledge acquisition today in favour of another informed by the presence of the artful and as Hart observes "are designed to quiet and shift the habitual chatter of the mind to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insight" (ibid, p. 29).

So let's return to the question: what characterizes the experience of the moment of knowing; and in particular contemplative knowing? Contemplative practices are many; and while exercises such as yoga and meditation; a walk in the forest; or reflection upon a text can move us towards a contemplative place, contemplation can also be fostered through the encounter with art. To explore this encounter, as a moment of contemplative knowing, I offer two visual exemplars. The first is a photograph titled *Navajo Reservation/Suburb Phoenix, Arizona U.S.A. 2011* (Burtynsky et al., 2013, p. 53) by the Canadian landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky. The second is a photograph of a fresco titled *Mocking of Christ* by the 15th century Italian artist Fra Angelico.



Burtynsky, Edward. (2013). *Navajo Reservation/Suburb Phoenix, Arizona, USA, 2011* [Chromogenic Print]
Source: © Edward Burtynsky. Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto

Edward Burtynsky is known for his photographs of distressed landscapes; and during his career has photographed mines, ship breaking and industrial landscapes. The above image is from his water series from 2011. On the left side of the image we see land of the Navajo people which extends beyond the frame of the photograph. On its right side we observe a suburb with tract housing, landscaped lawns and swimming pools which also extend beyond the picture frame. Separating the two places is a road which bisects the image in the middle.

The landscapes are in severe juxtaposition and the image feels like a montage of two pictures. We pause, are puzzled and seek to understand the story of this image. But the photograph is not a montage. Though it is imaginal, it is not of an imagined place. Instead it is of a real place in the American southwest; yet within this reality are seen two distinct landscapes.

On the intent of his photographic art Burtynsky observes:

...I wanted to make art that stops somebody in their tracks: they look at it and something doesn't add up. The image caught their imagination, made them stop and look at the world amid a deluge of imagery. In other words, you don't need to read a whole essay to understand what you're looking at. (Burtynsky as cited in Derry, 2021, para. 5)

This experience that Burtynsky describes is often encountered when viewing his images. Seeing them is accompanied with a pause when we wonder and question; and try to make sense of what we are looking at. They stop us gently; and in that moment when we rest in their presence and view them mindfully; their pictorial narratives have a power to foster ethical reflection about splintered societies; economic inequity; the challenge to sustainability caused by such inequity; and global narratives about the relation of environment and culture and the care of the planet.

The images are rich in ethical stories; and following Burtynsky "...you don't need to read a whole essay to understand what you're looking at" (ibid, para 5). The encounter with the image becomes an ethical engaging wherein the pictorial narrative becomes a wisdom lesson about our relation to others and the creation. From the encounter emerges a knowledge, but not simply knowledge of the world; rather an ethical knowledge or wisdom about our relation to it which emerges within the pause with the imaginal.

Wisdom is a word most often associated with texts, such as wisdom texts or wise stories. But the encounter with the artful, such as Burtynsky's landscape images guide onto an expansive discourse about the character of wisdom and how we may speak of how some images are wise too, as in the exemplar of Burtynsky's landscape photograph of the American southwest, in like manner that we speak of words that are wise.



Rossini, G. (2017). Image of Fra Angelico (1440). Mocking of Christ. [Digital Photograph].
Convent of San Marco, Florence, Italy

A second example of the notion of imaginal wisdom is offered by the work of the 15th century Italian monk-painter Fra Angelico. In this fresco there is depicted the story of the tormented Christ. In Fra Angelico's visual retelling we see a blind folded Christ on a plinth. To his right side we see a

dismembered head which spits on Christ while on his left side we see other hands which float freely in the image. On both corners of the plinth there are depicted two figures in contemplation.

My memory of the encounter with the image is a vivid one. I remember pausing on the threshold of the cell door for a few minutes looking at this unusual image. I was puzzled by it. It was unlike others that I had seen during my stay in Florence. And though I had taken several photographs of the painting before I left the cell, I returned to it a few minutes later. The image was compelling. It caused me to pause and nurtured reflection on the character of the centered self through the exemplar of Christ's story. While Christ's tormentor is splintered, the centered Christ is blindfolded seemingly impervious to his torments as he rests on the stone plinth whose metaphor is one for the core and immutable self.

Transcending its character as simply an image now housed in a place that has become a museum, Fra Angelico's pictorial retelling of Christ's story is also a contemplative moment: a probing of the "existential depths" that Merton (1972, p.9) speaks of in his reflections on the ethos of contemplation. And in the moment of pause when I stood at the threshold to the monk's cell and I looked upon this picture and reflection upon the character of self was seeded, there was nurtured the promise of wisdom.

The imaginal discourse of the splintered self and need for its reintegration is one that is shared by Fra Angelico and Burtynsky. In Fra Angelico's painting, the focus of such discourse is one's relation with self. In Burtynsky's imaginal juxtaposition of the desert and suburb, the discourse of self is expanded wherein is also fostered reflection on our relation to others and the creation.

In the encounter with the imaginal when, following Burtynsky, it "stops somebody in their tracks...and something doesn't add up" (Burtynsky as cited in Derry, 2021, para. 5) are moments of pauses and potentialities which enrich the character of contemplative knowing and its promise as wisdom. That is, knowledge as wisdom emergent in those imaginal encounters when we pause and the encounter with the artful seeds ethical reflection upon self, others and the creation.

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