



SOME WAYS WE CAN BE WISE

BY TOM ATLEE

As the scope and complexity of our world's problems grow, so grows our need for wisdom. When people talk about wisdom, they often use sight-related words such as insight, foresight, discernment, farsightedness, brilliance, reflection, and vision. This metaphor of seeing offers a powerful way to begin to evaluate the wisdom of decisions, actions, policies, leaders, and so on.

- *We are wise when we extend our vision to perceive the largest possible perspective of a situation.* This expansion of perspective takes us closer to encountering the “whole” of life. Even though we can never experience that whole in its full scope and detail, there is much wisdom in any motion toward it.

- *We are wise when we extend our vision into the future to the consequences of our present actions—and learn from reflecting on those consequences, especially before we act.* There is much wisdom, then, in applying this expanded perspective to help us meet our needs in ways that don't undermine the ability of our children's children to meet theirs. Some call this “sustainability.”

- *We are wise when we extend our vision beyond the clamor of this moment's shallow desires and immediate demands and opportunities to understand and care for our deeper, longer-term needs.* While our desires and appetites may feel vividly personal, private, and unique, our deepest needs are universal. We can find great peace in satisfying them in harmony with others and in co-creating the common good. There is much wisdom in pursuing our own best interests through the pursuit of a world that works for all.

- *We are wise when we extend our vision beyond current events—both personal and collective—back into the history behind those events and forward into possible futures.* In that history and those futures lie causes and stories and motivations

that we can work with to call forth new options and energies. There is much wisdom in bringing the power of such understandings into the present unfolding of life.

- *We are wise when we extend our vision beyond our personal view—and beyond the dominant view of our group or culture—to hear and understand the views of others.*

Every view has blind spots, and all knowing rests on unexamined assumptions. As these are revealed through encounters with other views and ways of knowing, we can deepen our understanding. And so we are wise to value diversity, dissonance, and dissent and to learn how to use their potent gifts well. There is much wisdom accessible through the use of dialogue to help us tap that latent power together on behalf of our whole community.

- *We are wise when we extend our vision beyond convenient labels and judgments to view things more as they are.* Doing so entails becoming familiar with the ways our thoughts and feelings—and, collectively, our culture and media—trick us into narrowing our view. Good and bad, order and chaos, individual and collective, you and me, simplicity and complexity—these tantalizingly useful distinctions hide the fact that reality, in all its dynamic wholeness, embraces both sides of every dichotomy. There are ways in which apparent opposites not only define and depend on each other, but live within each other and dance together. There is much wisdom in becoming aware of this bigger, truer picture of life.

- *We are wise when we extend our vision beyond isolated facts and linear logic into the whole fabric of life, using all the forms of knowing that are given to us.* These include intuition, spiritual experience, and the sciences that attempt to appreciate the whole and our relationship to it, such as ecology, complexity and chaos theories, and the consciousness

sciences. With each way of knowing, we access new dimensions of reality. There is much wisdom in weaving them together, using each tool in our cognitive toolbox according to its best purpose, along with all the others, and letting none colonize our awareness to the exclusion of the rest.

- *We are wise when we extend our vision beyond certainty to the underlying, all-encompassing, ever-unfolding mystery of life.*

Once we see through the illusion of certainty, humility and humor become natural, and paradox, ambiguity, and change become friends and teachers on our journey through life. In the midst of wonder, we encounter each situation with the curiosity and sense of adventure befitting wise and joyful spirits. There is much wisdom to be gleaned as we marvel at the nuance and vastness we encounter at each bend in the road.

- *We are wise when we extend our vision beyond our personal world to the world of our fellow humans and all other life.* This reaching into the world of other lives is the wisdom of compassion and the realization that our destiny is bound up with the destiny of all others. There is much wisdom in recognizing our vast and vivid interdependence. This wisdom can lead to many soulfully effective solutions to the diverse sufferings of our world and its people. We need our wisest eyes to find them.

These wise eyes are ours, if we choose to see through them together. ■

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