

Foreword to *Ken Wilber: Thought as Passion* by Frank Visser

It is a pleasure to introduce my friend Frank Visser's book, *Ken Wilber: Thought as Passion*. Since I seem to be related to the subject of the book, sometimes intimately, perhaps I will be forgiven if I open with a self-serving comment. I very much appreciate the subtitle, *thought as passion*. When I first moved to California, in 1983, and stayed with Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan in their lovely home in Tiburon, I became good friends with Rollo May, who at that time was 75 years old, but still vibrant, sharp, luminous. Rollo was a true hero of mine, for many reasons. First, he was a student and friend of Paul Tillich's, and Tillich was one of the truly great existentialists, as well as one of the two or three finest theologians of this century. Second, Rollo May was the major interpreter of existentialism for America, and especially existential psychology. Rollo was a living connection to the great European philosophers that had been so formative for me. (I have often described myself as a northern European thinker with a southern European lifestyle who practices Eastern religion—or something like that. But “American” is not how I particularly think of myself, although, annoyingly, it is how Europeans think of me, showing how hard it is to shake cultural embeddedness. But really, Anglo-Saxon empiricism and cowboy pragmatism: who needs it?) Third, Rollo was a wonderful human being, warm and witty and wise.

Here's the self-serving comment. On the cover of one of my books (*Up from Eden*) was a quote from Rollo: “Ken Wilber is the most passionate philosopher that I know.” Every now and then somebody has said something kind about my work, but that

is still my favorite, especially since it came from Rollo, who, as a true existentialist, believed that passion and truth are close to identical. I mention it now because Frank's subtitle reminded me of that comment and how much it meant to me. Philosophy, to have any meaning at all, must sizzle with passion, boil your brain, fry your eyeballs, or you're just not doing it right. And that applies to the other end of the spectrum of feelings as well: real philosophy is gentle as fog and quiet as tears, it holds the world as a delicate infant, raw and open and vulnerable. I sincerely hope that if I have brought anything to this field, it is a bit of passion.

The following book, although it purports to be about me and my work, is actually about an integral approach to philosophy, psychology, spirituality—to the human condition on the whole. It is true that this book is a chronicle of my own journey to what I hope are increasingly integral stances, but I believe that the only enduring parts of that journey are the ideas themselves, not the bearer of those ideas.

In this volume, Frank presents a summary of some of the phases of my work and his commentary on them. Allow me to get the standard disclaimer out of the way, which is that, in fairness to other treatments of my work, I cannot endorse any of them, including this one. I have not read this book for accuracy (except some of the biographical material), and thus I cannot vouch for its soundness, nor can I respond to critics who use the interpretations given in this book. Having said that, Frank Visser has certainly studied this material as carefully as anybody, and I am deeply appreciative of his efforts to make an integral approach more available to the public. Whether or not this book represents my ideas accurately, it definitely represents ideas that need to be a part of any integral conversation, and for that reason alone, this is an invaluable contribution to

the ongoing integral dialogue. I myself have some friendly disagreements with Frank about many of these topics, but I always learn something important from him in our exchanges, and I believe you will, too.

“Integral” means comprehensive, inclusive, nonmarginalizing, embracing. Integral approaches to any field attempt to do exactly that—to include as many perspectives, styles, and methodologies as possible in a coherent view of the topic. In a certain sense, integral approaches are “meta-paradigms,” or ways to draw together an already-existing number of separate paradigms into an interrelated network of approaches that are mutually enriching. In consciousness studies, for example, there are at least a dozen different schools, but an integral approach insists that all twelve of them have important if partial truths that need to be included in any comprehensive account. The same is true for the many schools of psychology, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, spirituality: they all have important pieces of the integral puzzle, and all of them need to be honored and included in a more comprehensive or integral approach.

I am often asked which of my own books I would recommend as an introduction; I still believe *A Brief History of Everything* is perhaps the best (although *A Theory of Everything* is the probably the shortest and simplest). *Brief History* was written as a popular or more accessible version of *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (SES), which was the first major statement of my own integral view. The books prior to SES are preliminary explorations in integral studies, and, although many of them present what I hope are important pieces of an integral view, were I to summarize my work, I would not start before *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. As I said, SES was the first book to outline my own version of integral studies (which is sometimes called “AQAL,” short for “all quadrants,

all levels, all lines, all states, all types”). After presenting SES, I would discuss the earlier books only as they were useful in forming the subcomponents of a more integral theory. The problem with chronological accounts of my work is that, in reliving earlier debates and dialogues, many of the terms as I now use them become irreversibly contaminated with the distortions of critics who at the time misunderstood what was being said. I personally do not believe that those debates are of much historical interest, in that a history of distortions is actually a history of slander, not facts. At the same time, as a story, it’s intriguing enough, and has merit, if any, as a study in paradigm clashes, where all sides in the discussions (including me) had their fair share of misunderstandings.

The events leading up to SES, which was published in 1995, may be of interest. I had not written or published much for almost a decade, a decade largely devoted to caring for a wife who was diagnosed with cancer shortly after we were married; we hadn’t had a honeymoon when the shocking news arrived. Treya and I were married in 1983; she died in 1989. At her request, I wrote of our ordeal in *Grace and Grit*. Apart from that, I had written little in ten years. The events with Treya changed me deeply, profoundly, irrevocably. I believe that SES represented, in part, the results of the combined growth that Treya and I did for each other. We grew up together, we were enlightened together, and we died together. All of my books up to SES always had a dedication. Starting with SES, none of my books have had a dedication, because all of them have been dedicated to her.

Whatever it was that happened, it was as if all the books I had done previously—some ten or eleven of them—were merely preparations, preliminary glimpses, or parts of

an integral embrace still struggling to emerge. It was as if the events that transpired with Treya allowed a growth in spirit, given by grace, that finally made enough room for me to even be able to see some of the integral horizons involved. In any event, I know that all of the work I have done subsequently came out of a Heart that I alone did not discover.

My work is sometimes divided into four phases, with the latest (phase-4) being dated with SES and six or seven subsequent books. I am often asked if there is a “phase-5” on the horizon, and I’m not sure exactly what to say about that. As Frank reports, I have in the last year written around 2000 pages, and I suppose some of that, which seems to be fairly novel, might qualify. Since much of this material will be released only after Frank’s book is out, interested readers can see some of it posted at wilber.shambhala.com and integralinstitute.org, and you can decide for yourself whether it merits a high-sounding “phase-5” name or is simply a bunch of rambling repetitions of earlier material. Part of it does seem definitely new—an integral semiotics, as well as an “integral calculus,” or a form of mathematics that replaces variables with perspectives. But who knows?

The one thing I do know, and that I would like to emphasize, is that any integral theory is just that—a mere theory. I am always surprised, or rather shocked, at the common perception that I am recommending an intellectual approach to spirituality, when that is pretty much the opposite of my view. Just because an author writes, say, a history of dancing, does not mean that the author is advocating that people stop dancing and merely read about it instead. I have written academic treatises that cover areas such as spirituality and its relation to a larger scheme of things, but my recommendation is always that people take up an actual spiritual practice, don’t merely read about it. An

integral approach to dancing says, take up dancing itself, and sure, read a book about it, too. Do both, but in any event, don't merely read the book. That's like taking a vacation to Bermuda by sitting at home and looking through a book of maps. My books are maps, but please, go to Bermuda and see for yourself.

See for yourself if, in the depths of your own awareness, right here and now, you can find the entire Kosmos, because that is where it resides. Birds are singing, in your awareness. Ocean waves are crashing, in your awareness. Clouds are floating by, in the sky of your own awareness. What is his awareness of yours, that holds the entire universe in its embrace and knows the secrets even of God? In the still point of the turning world, in the secret center of the known universe, in the eyes of the very one reading this page, at the very source of thought itself, watch the entire Kosmos emerge, dancing wildly with a passion philosophy tries to capture, crowned with a glory and sealed with a wonder lovers seek to share, rushing through a radiant world of time that is but eternity's bid to be seen: what is this Self of yours?

An integral approach is merely an attempt to categorize, in conceptual terms, some of this glory as it manifests itself. But it is no more than that. Every one of my books has at least one sentence, usually buried, that says the following (this is the version found in *The Atman Project*): "There follows, then, the story of the Atman project. It is a sharing of what I have seen; it is a small offering of what I have remembered; it is also the Zen dust you should shake from your sandals; and it is finally a lie in the face of that Mystery which only alone is."

In other words, all of my books are lies. They are simply maps of a territory, shadows of a reality, gray symbols dragging their bellies across the dead page, suffocated

signs full of muffled sound and faded glory, signifying absolutely nothing. And it is the nothing, the Mystery, the Emptiness alone that needs to be realized: not known but felt, not thought but breathed, not an object but an atmosphere, not a lesson but a life.

There follows a book of maps; hopefully more comprehensive maps, but maps nonetheless. Please use them only as a reminder to take up dancing itself, to inquire into this Self of yours, this Self that holds this page and this Kosmos all in a single glance. And then express that glory in integral maps, and sing with passion of the sights you have seen, the sounds that the tender Heart has whispered only to you in the late hours of the quiet night, and come and join us and tell us what you have heard, in your own trip to Bermuda, in the vibrant Silence that you alone own, and the radiant Heart that we alone, together, can discover.

K. W.

Denver, Colorado

December 2002