

Foreword to *Where's Wilber At? Ken Wilber's Integral Vision in the New Millennium*
by Brad Reynolds

Brad Reynolds has written an eloquent, passionate, beautiful book about my ideas. I can only be grateful for the time, effort, and energy he has put into it. I believe it will help many people come to an appreciation of a more inclusive, more comprehensive, more integral way to think and feel about the world, and to find a happy, realized, awakened place in it.

As always with books about my work, I must first, however, make a standard disclaimer, which is that I cannot endorse any of these books for content or accuracy. There are numerous books and articles purporting to explain my work, but to date I have collaborated with none of them, unfortunately, because once you get started in that, it's just endless. Therefore, to be fair, I have endorsed none of them in that regard. Of course, this makes me feel like a cad, but although one can embrace all of eternity in one's heart, one can only do so much with the actual hours in a day.

In *The Eye of Spirit*, I presented an integral theory of interpretation that explained (and hopefully synthesized) the many ways in which a writer, author, artist, or speaker can be legitimately interpreted. Take, for example, a van Gogh painting. What can we legitimately say about the meaning of the painting?

I suggest that there are at least five or six legitimate types of interpretation. Very briefly, one type is to try to determine what the artist's *original intent* was. What did the painting mean for van Gogh? The easiest way—and the only sure way—to determine

this is to ask van Gogh himself. There is really no other way to be certain that you have his original intent or his own personal meaning for the painting. To determine this, one must enter a hermeneutic circle—a circle of mutual understanding—with van Gogh himself, and both of you talk and discuss the painting and its meaning until van Gogh tells you, “Yes, that is my meaning. I believe that you now have a good understanding of my original intent. You may agree or disagree with it, but I believe you now adequately understand my own meaning.”

Of course, if van Gogh is dead, we cannot discuss this meaning with him, and so we have to try to reconstruct it, using, for example, his diaries, things he said about the painting while he was alive, what others reported who had talked directly with van Gogh about the painting, and so on. This is a legitimate endeavor, especially if the person is dead. But for any living artist or writer, the original intent can only firmly be established by a direct communication with the artist in a dialogue aimed at mutual understanding. (I am not saying that you cannot engage in this type of interpretation and criticism without talking to the artist, only that the further away you are from the hermeneutic circle of the artist’s consciousness, then the *less likely* you are to get it right, and the only final authority on original intent remains the artist himself or herself.)

But there are several other legitimate types of interpretation of the painting, and not all of them depend upon talking with van Gogh. For example, although van Gogh himself is the only one who can pronounce accurately on his original *conscious* intent, perhaps van Gogh has some *unconscious* intentions—or shadow elements—and these elements might slip into the painting in disguised forms. A psychoanalyst or other depth psychologist might be able to help us determine some of those hidden meanings. Of

course, because shadow elements are still in the general realm of the author's intentions, it would be best if the psychoanalyst could talk directly with van Gogh—armchair psychotherapy is a risky and wobbly business—but even without that, it is a legitimate endeavor if done carefully and professionally.

Another type of interpretation involves trying to determine how any hidden background cultural contexts—such as class, sex, gender, race, or creed—might have influenced the meaning of the painting. This, too, can be done without consulting van Gogh (although naturally it would be fun to see what he had to say about all that). Many of the most influential postmodern theories of interpretation rely on the hidden backgrounds and contexts in which all artworks exist. Some examples of this type of important interpretation and criticism include feminist, Marxist, race-sensitive, postcolonialist, ecological, and so on.

Another—and also very important—type of interpretation is called *viewer-response theory*. This simply says that the meaning of any artwork is the interpretation it sets going in a viewer or listener or reader of the work. In this sense, the meaning of the van Gogh painting is whatever *you* think it means. The sum total of those responses is what the painting “means.”

My point in that essay was that ALL of those interpretations are legitimate, and that all of them actually tap into various aspects of the integral fabric of contexts within contexts in which all artworks exist. The only problem with those major schools of interpretation is that virtually all of them think that their version of interpretation is the only legitimate version there is—but what else is new in this less-than-integral age, yes?

I bring all of this up because it relates directly to the book you hold in your hand (and to criticism—both positive and negative—of my work in general). The vast majority of criticism of my work has claimed to be criticizing my actual views—that is, my original intent—when virtually none of them have actually done so. That is, most criticism is of this form: “Wilber believes—or Wilber’s model maintains—that A, B, C, and D.” But in virtually no case has the critic *accurately* stated what my beliefs are, or correctly stated what my original intent is, because none of the critics I am referring to has ever talked to me directly about any of these ideas. Therefore, what these critics are actually doing is presenting their own *reader-response* ideas—which is absolutely fine!—except that most of them are claiming that those represent my *original intent*—which is patent nonsense. But fun nonsense, if you want to get into the swing of it. But under those circumstances, the result is exactly as Oscar Wilde said: “Criticism is the highest form of autobiography.”

(Are critics who have not discussed my work with me allowed to criticize it? Of course! They can perform all of the other types of interpretation and criticism that I mentioned, from unconscious intent to background contexts to reader-response. But these critics claim, implicitly or explicitly, to be reporting and then criticizing my original intent, and yet without talking to me in a circle of mutual understanding, they have no such warrant, as we were saying. Now it so happens that I do enter into dialogue with hundreds of scholars about my work, and they do indeed, I can report, understand my original intent well enough to criticize it accurately and aggressively, which believe me, they do. And because they are part of the hermeneutic circle with the artist’s

consciousness, then they can more fruitfully and accurately engage in the interpretation and criticism of the author's original intent.)

I mention all of this somewhat boring academic stuff for a very good reason, I promise. Which is: the reason that I must offer a disclaimer to this and similar books and essays is that, even with the very positive accounts of my work such as Brad's, nonetheless I still have not had a chance to discuss their interpretations in any detail. And therefore I cannot endorse them as accurately reflecting my views. And, like I say, I truly feel horrible about this, but there it is.

So how should one approach a book such as Brad's (or any of the other accounts that are not part of an ongoing hermeneutic circle, including any negative and positive criticism)? Well, the short answer is, this book is Brad Reynolds' *reader response* to my work. It is not a summary of my work, but a summary of Brad Reynolds' reader response. It is a book of what he thinks is important, what he especially responds to, what he believes is most significant, and so on. Of course, he is going to try to make it as "objective" as he can—or try to capture as much of my original intent as possible—but that is what I am saying is, and unfortunately must be, unconfirmed in large measure at this time.

(The same is true, for example, of Frank Visser's book *Ken Wilber—Thought as Passion*. That is a book of Frank's reader responses to my work. Frank has a strong belief in Theosophy, which I do not share at all, and hence his reader response veers sharply from my own original intent. In other words, that book does not represent my views or my original intent correctly; but it does give a fine summary of Frank's reader response to my work, and can be read fruitfully from that vantage point. But my point is

that such is unavoidably true for all works that do not partake of the author's hermeneutic circle, and that is fine, as long as people realize what is going on here.)

Some people who have summarized my work do so primarily from an interest in business; others, from what it might tell us about psychology and psychotherapy; others focus on science and possibly higher forms of science; others zero in on the spiritual aspects and make them prominent. A presentation for Harvard Business School will have no mention of spirituality at all, and for good reason. Likewise, a presentation on integral law will find little mention of the transpersonal, whereas a presentation at Zen retreat will focus heavily on it. And so on.

Brad's book is exuberantly spiritual, more so than I am comfortable with for a larger audience, not because I wish in any way to retreat from the spiritual dimensions of my work, but because a very small percentage of the population is at a place where they can hear this type of message and not recoil. Skillful means demands that discretion be the better part of valor, and this is an indiscreet book. But for those as God-intoxicated as Brad sometimes is, then by all means take that aspect of my work and make it front and center. It is a grand and glorious ride, even if it will alienate many. But for those of you wondering to whom to give this book, I would say, first and foremost, only to those deeply comfortable with spirituality.

But the integral approach can be used at whatever level or wave of development one is stationed, spiritual or not. In the great spectrum from archaic to magic to mythic to rational to pluralistic to holistic to transpersonal and nondual, one can use an integral framework (the AQAL framework) at whatever level or wave you are at, and the truly spiritual or transpersonal dimensions need to be brought in only if the person is open to

them in an authentic way. One of the reasons that the integral approach has caught on so spectacularly in the last five years is that we at Integral Institute have found ways to tailor the approach for different audiences, so that they could use whatever of the framework made sense to them and jettison the rest, if they liked. This course has proven to be very helpful for all concerned, and if you would like to join us in this endeavor, please see www.IntegralInstitute.org.

“Where’s Wilber At?”—as a title [or subtitle]—gives the flavor, I believe, of the still rather rapidly unfolding nature of my work. At one point, somewhat facetiously and humorously, and somewhat seriously, I undertook to categorize the phases of my own work, to save critics the labor. I divided my corpus into 4 major phases, which Brad explains and I needn’t repeat. But most commentators have taken to calling my recent round of written works “phase 5,” and I agree with that. In fact, this most recent phase, which is generally called “post-metaphysical,” is in my opinion the most significant work I have done. Agree with or not, I do believe is it my best work to date, particularly announced with the follow-up volume to *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, which is presently unnamed but is generally referred to simply as “volume 2 of the Kosmos trilogy” (of which SES is volume 1). You can find excerpts of this volume at www.KenWilber.com. I hope to have it ready for publication by spring of 2005, and it will likely be out later that year.

The explosion of interest in all things integral over the last five years has resulted, among other things, in the creation of www.IntegralUniversity.org, the world’s first integral learning community, and—just for fun—www.IntegralNaked.org. If you are at all interested in a more integral approach to life, love, work, relationships, then please

come join us at any of those cyberspace integral refugee camps, we would love to have you join us in this extraordinary adventure of consciousness....

Let me again thank Brad Reynolds for the loving and exuberant attention he has given this book. If I cannot get into the business of reading and checking for accuracy all such endeavors, that does not mean that I don't deeply appreciate the care, concern, passion, love, and understanding that has gone into them—all of them—and none more so than Brad's.

I believe that integral awareness is an actual territory that many people are already inhabiting, and that they are drawn to my work simply because I have presented one of the first, rough, but workable maps of that integral territory. I did not invent that territory, I have simply come up with one of the first maps of it, and people already there find these maps useful. But like all pioneering maps—remember those maps the early European explorers made of the Americas, where Florida was the size of Greenland and Cuba stretched all the way to the south pole?—the maps I have drawn are hopelessly crude, initial, hesitant, hopeful. But they are almost the only maps we have at this time of the territory of your own integral awareness, and my hope is only that they last long enough to get us to better maps. If so, works like Brad's will have helped enormously on this fabulous adventure.

Take care,

Ken Wilber

Denver, Colorado

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