



Meta-Genius: A Celebration of Ken's Writings (Part 2)
Reflections on His Work through Its Many Positive Critical Reviews

“Ken Wilber is a new kind of genius, a meta-genius, somebody who is a genius in numerous disciplines and has showed us the ways that they can be drawn together and integrated. Far from being a mere ‘lumper,’ as those unfamiliar with the details of his work might claim, Ken is a unity-in-diversity theorist: he skimps on neither the unity (as the dividers do) nor the diversity (as the lumpers do). He’s a meta-genius that sees both the extraordinary details of the trees, but can also see the majesty and meaning of the whole forest. This is the whole point of Integral Methodological Pluralism—it’s both integral and pluralistic. His entire life he has been attacked by both the dividers and lumpers, but fortunately for us, has not been deterred from his work.” Stuart Davis, author, singer/songwriter, *The Stuart Davis TV Show*

In [Part 1](#) of this three-part commemoration of Ken’s works, we explained that, in going through some old computer files in preparation for the move to the new loft, we found a ton of critical quotes and reviews of Ken’s earlier books, and they were such a hoot to read, we thought we would share them. It became obvious, as we started to post them, that the reason for doing so was not braggadocio—because we were concerned about that—but rather a politically incorrect celebration of great achievement (politically incorrect because in today’s Great Mediocrity, nobody is supposed to be better than anybody else. We say that with genteel lovingness, but also real concern, because the Great Mediocrity is heading straight for a real “Idiocracy,” as in the movie). But this was a way to celebrate and honor not only Ken, but all the pioneers in this integral field who worked so hard to clear the space that too many of us take for granted. So this was a commemorative celebration or an appreciative gala, where each new quote was met with a “Way to go!”

It also became a meditative reflection on how the world is doing in terms of opening itself to more comprehensive, holistic, and integrative ways to view and approach problems. After all, various empirical studies suggest that there is less than 0.5% of the population at mature vision-logic, or centaur, or turquoise, or post-autonomous—call it what you will, the simple fact is that unless various critics are at turquoise or higher, they are unlikely to see the full fabric of Ken’s work and vision. Of course, you can be at turquoise and definitely disagree with Ken’s work; but those not

at turquoise (e.g., green or orange) will automatically disagree with it, and usually vituperatively (or, alternatively, agree with it for all the wrong reasons, which also happens quite often). This has always been a problem for anybody at second tier or higher: the world cannot see you, or hear you, or know what you are about, and you simply must find ways to deal with that carpet burn. You can be at turquoise, and possibly have a different view of integral than Ken does, but you still know what we mean, don't you? The cultural center of gravity is lower than the altitude at which you fly, and so you are suffering carpet burns, one way or another, yes?

You can imagine what it was what like for Ken's work from the very first book, which was turquoise by any standards (see the direct *Spiral Dynamics* quote about that specific book later on). In some ways, things have improved in significant ways since that book, written in 1972. Of course, in many other ways, not at all. And in some ways, the world has regressed. **But the leading-edge itself is becoming more and more integral**, and noticeably so, with world leaders quoting Ken's work; and with all of his books still in print, something of a record; and with his *Collected Works* released while he was still alive (indeed, just in his forties), something of a historical first—and integral or integrative works are appearing in numerous fields, with or without any influence from Ken. All of this is good news, indeed. But there is still so far to go....

So reading these quotes has been fun, sobering, exciting, depressing, energizing, all at once. But a celebration they are, for all those discernable ways that the leading-edge, if not the center of gravity, is becoming more Integral, and for all those pioneers who have worked to make it so—including you, by the simple fact that your own center of gravity is likely second tier or higher, or you wouldn't be interested in Ken's work. Again, agree with it or disagree with it, birds of a feather fly at similar altitudes. This is a fact—*adequatio*—that is not discussed in polite company; but it's damn important and can't be avoided: if I'm at one wave of growth and development, I won't be able to see those flying at higher or wider or deeper waves—I will be part of those who are, as the title of one of Robert Kegan's books puts it, *In Over Our Heads*.

Most of the following critical reviews are by those at teal/turquoise or higher. A few are positive reviews from somebody obviously at orange or green, so we are aware of that possibility (and the review loses some of its legitimacy—i.e., *adequatio*—due to that. But we still agree with its general conclusions! ;-) Anyway, in [Part 1](#), we covered the major books of phase-1, phase-2, and phase-3, up through *Transformations of Consciousness* (but particularly focusing on *Spectrum*, *Atman*, and *Eden*). After *Up from Eden*, Ken wrote or co-wrote 6 more books leading up to SES, the first 3 while he was still a dishwasher (*The Holographic Paradigm*; *A Sociable God*; *Eye to Eye*; *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World's Great Physicists*; *Transformations of Consciousness*; *Spiritual Choices: The Problem of Recognizing Authentic Paths to Inner Transformation*).

The flood of incredibly positive critical reviews continued to pour in, with relatively few negative ones—and again, these were by top experts in various fields (this was before the internet era when the most persistent voices tend to dominate the

conversation instead of the most knowledgeable ones). Referring to *Eye to Eye*, for example, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi said, “**All future Kabbalah will rest on Ken Wilber’s work**” (something he kindly repeated on several occasions), and James Fadiman called Ken “**the most important voice in psychology today.**”

Right as Ken was completing *Transformations*, he met Treya. He didn’t write again for almost a decade, for reasons you’ll see if you keep reading. He then poured his heart into *Grace and Grit*, the story of their marriage, and then we have *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*—and then the works leading up to phase-5....

So please join us in the following celebration. This time we’re going to give, along with a small sampling of the many positive blurbs, several long reviews. Of course, read these or not, as you wish, but they are a good sampling of the types of responses that Ken’s work often solicits: it gets people thinking, often in ways they hadn’t before, and often with solutions to the problems that he uncovers and illumines.

[Part 1](#) covered the period where Ken wrote the following (although, as noted, we focused mostly on *Spectrum*, *Atman*, and *Eden*):

[*The Spectrum of Consciousness* \(1977\)](#)

[*No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth* \(1979\)](#)

[*The Atman Project* \(1980\)](#)

[*Up from Eden* \(1981\)](#)

[*The Holographic Paradigm* \(1982\)](#)

[*A Sociable God* \(1983\)](#)

[*Eye to Eye: The Quest for the New Paradigm* \(1983\)](#)

[*Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World’s Great Physicists* \(1984\)](#)

[*Transformations of Consciousness* \[with Jack Engler, Daniel Brown, Mark Epstein, John Chirban\] \(1986\)](#)

[*Spiritual Choices: The Problem of Recognizing Authentic Paths to Inner Transformation* \[with Dick Anthony and Bruce Ecker\] \(1987\)](#)

In this Part 2, we’ll cover the period of:

[*Grace and Grit* \(1991\)](#)

[*Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* \(1995\)](#), and its popularization,

[*A Brief History of Everything* \(1996\)](#), probably Wilber’s most popular book to this day, and still perhaps the best single book to read.

And then in Part 3 (coming soon) we cover the period of:

[*The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad* \(1997\)](#)

[*The Marriage of Sense and Soul: Integrating Science and Religion* \(1998\)](#)

[*One Taste: The Journals of Ken Wilber* \(1999\)](#)

[Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy \(2000\)](#)
[Boomeritis: A Novel That Will Set You Free \(2002\)](#)
[A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science, and Spirituality \(2001\)](#)
[The Simple Feeling of Being: Visionary, Spiritual, and Poetic Writings \(2004\)](#)
[Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World \(2006\)](#)

GRACE AND GRIT (1991)

There were so many, but we'll start with just one review of *Grace and Grit*. What can you say about this book, or this time in Ken's life?, when 10 days after the marriage to his soulmate, it was discovered she had cancer. The 5-year survival rate for her type of cancer is 0.0%—and by doing everything right, that's exactly what she got: 5 years. She died in 1989. That marriage is still the single most important event in Ken's life. Treya changed Ken deeply; the people who read that book are also changed, very deeply, by Treya, whom Ken captured beautifully by using entries from her own journal *to let her speak for herself*, thus weaving his voice and her voice together in a tapestry that truly is one of those books about which people say: it changed my life. Ken received hundreds of letters from readers; his favorite is still a very simple one from a 14-year-old girl: "I used to be afraid of death. After reading this book, I am no longer afraid. I wanted you to know this."

Here is the review by John Wren-Lewis; the lay-out is as the magazine did so:

A MIRACLE OF CONSCIOUS DYING

A Spiritual Classic for Today:

"After this book, spiritual writing can never be the same again...."
(Professor John Wren-Lewis's choice for Book of the Decade)

"Thou mettest with things dying, I with things new born."

-Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale

Ken Wilber's book *Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber* (Shambhala, 1993) is required reading for anyone remotely associated with care or counseling of the dying or bereaved--which means, in effect, for anybody who can read English and isn't into running away from the plain facts of life. It's certainly one of the most important books I've ever read, and probably the most important of the past decade. Its author's earlier work has earned him titles like "the Einstein of consciousness" and "the Aquinas

of the New Age”, but in this book he shoots past all such heavy intellectual categorization by telling the compelling story of his newlywed wife’s terminal illness, which turned into a triumphant voyage of spiritual discovery for them both. His astonishing scholarship comes to life as never before when he describes how his pioneer thinking about mind and body, about science and psychology with a “trans-personal” dimension, and numerous related themes was tested in the fire of direct confrontation with suffering and mortality.

For those unacquainted with his writings, this is the best possible introduction, since here for the first time he allows the human being behind the thinking to emerge, in a “warts and all” portrait which gains a kind of stereoscopic three-dimensionality by the inclusion of numerous extracts from his dying wife’s diary, letters, and articles written for the San Francisco Cancer Support Community which she helped found during her illness. These add not only the all important feminine perspective, but also that of a practicing psychological counselor with wide-ranging environmental and educational interests, who in the years before they met had, amongst other achievements, helped found (with John Denver) the famous Windstar Institute in Colorado, had been a facilitator for the US/USSR Youth Exchange Program, and also a supporting founder of Rocky Mountain Institute with her good friends Amory and Hunter Lovins. For the very same reasons, I believe readers who already know Wilber’s earlier books will find this the best yet, one which may well join the ranks of humanity’s great spiritual classics.

Its combination of mystical insight with intellectual clarity and ruthless emotional honesty make it worthy of comparison, in my view, with St. Augustine’s Confessions. Yet, it is also very much a product of our “post-Christian” late twentieth century. One of the main reasons why Wilber has been able to become a leading spokesman and philosopher of spirituality for our time is precisely that he is a born-and-bred child of Western secularized scientific culture; he can, for example, take for granted a whole background of contemporary scientific and psychological discoveries that were quite unknown, or known only to a few specialists, before World War 2. And in keeping with the fact that most educated people today think of spirituality, if at all, in terms of oriental imports like meditation and yoga, Wilber’s earlier books have confronted readers with cover-portraits of him in which he has the shaven head of a Buddhist monk. On the cover of *Grace and Grit*, however, he is joined by his wife, whose head is equally bald from the after-effects of chemotherapy--which epitomizes the human dimension which his whole presentation of mysticism’s “perennial philosophy” acquires in this book, a dimension where the fact of cancer is very much part of common awareness.

In fact, the Wilbers might almost be seen as archetypes of late-twentieth century Western culture, which for good and ill alike is primarily American in flavour. Until tragedy struck, with the discovery of a malignant breast-tumour during what was thought to be a routine pre-honeymoon medical checkup, theirs was a real-

life enactment of the American Dream--love at first meeting between the beautiful, intelligent, idealistic daughter of a wealthy Texas cattleman, and the pioneering author who'd kept himself by washing dishes in a café while writing six major books in as many years before the age of thirty. Amongst the cast of supporting characters are some of the most famous names of our time--singer John Denver, physicist Fritjof Capra, Dan Elsberg who blew the whistle on America's Vietnam involvement, Michael and Dulce Murphy of the Esalen Institute at Big Sur, thanatologist Steve Levine, and many others. At the beginning of the second chapter we are given a sardonic glimpse of what married life might have been like for them had that checkup not cast the shadow of mortality:

"The wedding was set for November 26 (1983), a few months away. In the meantime we busied ourselves with all the necessary preparations. That is to say, Treya busied herself with all the necessary preparations. I wrote a book."

This is just one early instance of the author's willingness to expose the less admirable aspects of his own character (for he is of course well aware that almost all his female readers are likely to be feminists of one sort or another). He even drives home that his mind was more on his work than on the relationship, by entitling the chapter "Beyond Physics", which was the theme of the book he wrote, thought the main subject matter of the chapter is their friends' enthusiastic response to their engagement announcement, the wedding itself, the cancer bombshell and their first stunned reaction to it. Yet there is a positive as well as a negative irony in that choice of chapter-title and in his insistence on summarizing the book he was writing, about the mystical beliefs held by the greatest modern physicists (published in 1984 by Shambhala under the title *Quantum Questions*). When we are faced so starkly with the mortality of the flesh, some kind of transcendence of the physical is the only alternative to despair, and the real subject of Grace and Grit is Treya's experiential discovery of that transcendence before she died. Could it be that great physicists are sometimes driven to glimpse that transcendence by their confrontation with the fundamental contingency of all matter?

But transcending the physical doesn't mean ignoring it, and Ken's first response to the cancer diagnosis was to switch his formidable mind and energy to researching everything medical science knows and doesn't know about the disease--a task for which he was well equipped by his early training in biochemical research. His disturbing findings, which he reports in some detail (with admirable skill at translating technicalities into laypersons' language), would almost be worth the price of the whole book, though they are only incidental to its main theme. While never doing less than scrupulous justice to the skill and dedication of the medical profession, his account throws into high relief how the lack of any metaphysical or transpersonal paradigm in contemporary Western culture causes science in general and medical science in particular to assume, usually unconsciously and with the best intentions, an almost theological

role as arbiter of what's best for humanity. Thus public health propaganda emphasizes the virtues of catching cancer at an early stage, when there is some hope of treating it, while drawing a discrete veil over the fact that most of the medical treatments currently available involve devastating the body's immune system in a way which could prove fatal even if the cancer is cured.

The Wilbers learned this lesson the hard way, when Treya's initial treatment seemed for a while to have eradicated the cancer successfully, only to have her succumb to diabetes, "the number three killer of adult Americans....almost certainly triggered by chemotherapy, a not uncommon occurrence." Add to this the growing evidence that the immune system's power to cope with cancer itself may be far greater than is yet dreamt of in conventional oncologists' philosophy, and there would seem to be urgent need for some fundamental re-thinking in the whole area of public health policy on the subject. This should be a major objective for those who preach a more "holistic", "persons-centered" or "transpersonal" approach to medicine but they often do harm to their own case by lapsing into pseudo-logic, as the Wilbers also learned the hard way when various New Age therapists dumped their own theories on Treya by diagnosing her cancer as the result of "negative thoughts" or some deep unacknowledged grief "eating her up inside".

In one of the extracts from Treya's diary, she records how Ken exploded into decidedly unparliamentary language at one of these New Age wiseacres. "The only thing eating her up inside at the moment," he growled, "is assholes like you saying things like that." A whole chapter of the book is devoted to a careful analysis of the false logic involved in this kind of pseudo-psychologising and, even more important, the hidden personal motives that often underlie it--in particular, a secret desire to assume a superior stance as "one who has insight you don't have". Having been called the Aquinas of the New Age, Ken here demonstrates the same keen nose for rooting out false spirituality that the Angelic Doctor himself showed in his own day. For counselors of all kinds, his warnings on this issue would again be worth the price of the whole book, which incidentally reprints the brochure "What kind of Helping really Helps?" which Treya wrote for the San Francisco Cancer Support Community.

Ken tells us at the book's end that Treya saw this Community, which makes no charges, as her "child" when she knew she couldn't live to have an ordinary one. The terrifying yet wonderful central point of his story, at any rate as I read it, is that a real mystical awakening went hand in hand with that acceptance of having no claim on a human future. In the early years of her illness--indeed, right up to and through the battle against malignancy-recurrence which led to the diabetes--the Buddhist spirituality which they both practiced to get beyond "self-contraction" had been something which she did in the hope of transcending separateness and the fear it generates. With the discovery of yet another lump, a shift seemed to occur, which Ken noticed as an astonishing "passionate equanimity" and she herself marked by adopting a new name. Up to that point (in

1986), she'd been Terry, and when she'd dreamed at Findhorn many years before that her name was really Estrella, the Spanish word for star (pronounced Es-traiya), she'd dismissed it: As her then-boyish name (Terry) implied, she considered herself a no-nonsense type who wouldn't stoop to such New Age silliness as taking a new, cosmic-sounding name from a dream! Now, facing mortality on her 40th birthday in 1986, she found she was no longer identified with that stance and asked everyone to call her Treya--"a softer, more feminine, kinder, with a bit of mystery to it name. It was a first step in discovering a radically new kind of identity, or rather, of recognizing what had always really been her identity, as Infinite Spirit playing the game of "humaning" in her, in Ken and in everyone else. It is the discovery that lies at the core of all mysticism.

She in no way became superhuman: She still reacted with sheer rage and bitter, resigned crying a year later when waviness in her vision caused her to go for more tests, and revealed new tumours, this time on the brain itself. She was still prepared, in the interests of survival, to go to a German clinic for a kill-or-cure treatment that the American government had banned as too dangerous. But a mysterious process that had nothing to do with ordinary survival was afoot in her, and at the clinic the discovery of that new, transpersonal identity began to emerge. One small but not unimportant symptom of it was the discovery that her former prejudice against using Christian spiritual terms like "surrender to God" had gone--not because she'd undergone any kind of conversion from Buddhism, but because her personal beliefs and prejudices no longer seemed important enough to get in the way of any unexplored facet of spiritual experience. But more dramatic, indeed quite amazing, was the discovery of a joy in living that didn't depend on continuing to live, or even on being healthy. "I feel so incredibly blessed," she wrote in her diary. "I don't understand it! I know I may not live out the year, but listen to those birds sing!"

"Letting go" is a term much used nowadays in discussions of dying; Treya, well before her death, had discovered how it can also be the secret of living. It had enabled her to experience something which for most of us most of the time is, alas, hidden by the hyperactive clamor of the survival-drive--that at the core of being is an ultimate wonder which G.K. Chesterton once called, "joy without a cause", a satisfaction in the mere fact of existence which outshines all the merely temporary and superficial satisfactions that come from getting our personal preferences met. I can speak with firsthand authority on this subject because a much less gruesome close encounter with death in 1983 gave me the inestimable privilege of making the same discovery that Treya made, like all her others, the hard way--that when the survival-drive lets go because death seems inevitable, the sun of "joy without a cause" comes out from behind the cloud of "anxious thought" which normally hide it. To my utter astonishment, this joy can even transform the pains that result from life going against personal preferences. I've experienced this only with relatively minor afflictions such as flu, tinnitus and gastric ulcers, but Treya found it was even the case for the Big One, disintegration of the brain. In that German clinic, she found that the waviness in her vision

“became something to notice, to investigate”, and, for me the most telling sign of all, she actually found herself experiencing her mind’s automatic fear-reactions in the same way, as simply elements of “what is”, all parts of the same marvel of universal aliveness as the birdsong.

At the very end in America, months later, she refused medication in spite of considerable pain, precisely in order to experience final body-disintegration in this way. Ken uses the Buddhist term “witnessing” to describe it, but to Western ears this has cold and remote sound, whereas from numerous little hints in his text I get the definite impression that it was something altogether more positive. In my own NDE, I experienced something which it’s taken me ten years of what T.S. Eliot called “intolerable wrestle with words and meanings” to articulate with even faint adequacy: I experienced the sixty-year-old bodymind called John Wren-Lewis being reconstructed from Nothingness, particle by particle, by Infinite Consciousness, and every tiny element in that reconstruction was an act of infinite love, a love that had always been there, maintaining my finite existence for sixty years without my noticing it. Jesus’ statement about the hairs of our head being all numbered is now for me just a plain statement of experienced fact, and the final message I get from Grace and Grit is that the process of bodymind disintegration can be experienced in the same loving way by anyone who has recognized her/his true identity as Infinite Spirit playing the game of humaning.

Because the bodymind is human, and transcending personality no more means abolishing it than transcending the physical means ignoring matter, the experience of disintegration still requires “grit”, as Treya leaves us in no doubt--and I wouldn’t consider anyone less enlightened for choosing to use painkillers, which are, after all, as much a part of “what is” as bodily dissolution or birdsong. But that wasn’t Treya’s choice, and the positive love-energy of her experience (as contrasted with the cold impersonality implied by terms like “witnessing”) comes through in the fact that those final days were full of caring for others whenever she had the strength. When she finally chose to die, it was she who was sorry for Ken, not the other way around.

And she did choose to die, which is for me another incredibly important message from this book. The doctors were confident they could keep her alive for further days or even weeks, but she decided enough was enough, made sure Ken agreed, and just went, after saying some goodbyes. This suggests to me that when the false identity of separate selfhood is really seen through as illusion, bodily processes may co-operate with personal consciousness in ways that have nothing to do with will or control as we ordinarily understand those terms. This may be the secret of spiritual healing as practiced by mystics like Joel Goldsmith, who always insisted it was something radically different from “mind-power”. Perhaps if Treya had realized her true identity before the body’s self-maintenance processes had been ravaged by radiation and chemotherapy, she might have gone that way, to experience what the medical profession can at present only call “inexplicable remission”. But as this book makes clear, no spiritual discipline yet

discovered, not even the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen which Ken and Treya practiced, will bring about that identity-change without some other factor which, “by sad incompetence of human speech”, we can only call grace--a factor which seems to operate most often in close proximity to death itself.

My conviction, which I share with Jean Houston and many others, is that the human race is entering a new phase, a new dispensation if you will, wherein we can develop a more truly empirical mysticism than has ever existed in the dogma-dominated cultures of the past. If that is so, then a book like this, which allows us to observe the process of grace in action through a blow-by-blow account that is completely honest about the human frailties involved, is the most important contribution anyone can make. I know of no other mystical document, for example, which is so open about the “aggression that only married couples can muster” towards each other even when one of them is in the grip of terminal illness--yet unless such facts of “what is” are recognized, spiritual writing risks trailing off into mists of fantasy where all is sweetness and light. Ken has “told it like it was”, even while not backward in giving his own views and theories, and after this gift, spiritual writing can never be the same again.

If I had to choose an epigraph for this book, it would be that strange statement of Nietzsche, “You must have chaos then within you, if you are to give birth to a dancing star”. I fantasize that it was the element of Infinity that once was Nietzsche who sent Terry Killam that dream of her new name at Findhorn, for she did indeed give birth to a dancing star, and there is a sub-narrative of inserts all through the book which suggest, without any attempt at explanation, that something of that change of identity may have rubbed off on Ken as he experienced the chaos of bereavement. I look forward to his next book--but in the meantime, this one is a must.

Professor John Wren-Lewis,
Faculty of Religious Studies, University of Sydney

After *Grace and Grit*, Ken was in mourning for a year. “I was both sobbing uncontrollably on occasion, and simultaneously staying in the nondual luminous Emptiness that both of us entered the evening of her death. This extraordinary deepening of ever-present realization has never left me. That’s why I’ve always counted Treya as one of my root teachers. But she wasn’t here just for me; read the book, you’ll realize what she did for virtually everybody who came into contact with her. I believe Treya was part of the first batch of a new breed of women, who managed to both find themselves autonomously, and equally find themselves in relationship. At her passing-over ceremony, Sam Bercholz said, ‘Treya was the strongest person I ever met. Talking with her on the phone right before her death was like talking to a Buddha—it was so right there....’”

SEX, ECOLOGY, SPIRITUALITY (1995)

When Ken did start writing, it was as if all the books of that 7-year period were crammed into one book, and out came *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. There are a lot of things that can be said about that *magnum opus*, and we'll show you some of them. But perhaps the most amazing thing is how truly easy and even fun reading that book is, as several reviewers note. Ken has always called it "the best-written and easiest of my books to read." The thing is, it just keeps going and going and going: it's over 800 pages long. But it is a masterpiece, by any standards, and it marked the dramatic shift to phase-4.

"Ken Wilber's book changes everything. One of the great systemic thinkers of our time, he offers a profound and powerful meditation on the trajectory of Life itself. No one can afford to be ignorant of his revolutionary ideas."

--Mitchell Kapor, founder, *Lotus* and *Second Life*

"There are four great books of the twentieth century: Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*, and Ken Wilber's *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* is enormous in scope, insightful from beginning to end, and immensely courageous. A book of unparalleled scope and integrative vision. By assembling material from the physical, biological, and human sciences, Wilber helps us see the world whole and liberates us from narrow perspectives on the human adventure. This book will be history-making."

--Michael Murphy, co-founder, Esalen; author, *The Future of the Body*

"The 21st Century literally has three choices: Aristotle, Nietzsche, or Ken Wilber. This new book, written with remarkable scholarly breadth and depth, is exactly the medicine we need for the new century and the new millennium: not because it will make us feel good, but because it can jolt us awake."

--Jack Crittenden, cofounder *ReVision Journal*; author of *Beyond Individualism*

"Wilber's vision of possibility transcends old ways of thinking and renders old arguments obsolete. *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* is essential reading for anyone concerned with the welfare of the earth and the future of humanity."

--Frances Vaughan, *Paths beyond Ego, Shadows of the Sacred*

"The scope of the work is extraordinary. I know of only a handful of thinkers, such as Aurobindo in the East and Hegel in the West, who have assembled such vast evolutionary visions. Yet Wilber's view is unique not only in providing a vast vision but also in grounding that vision in contemporary research in fields such as cosmology, biology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and ecology. A masterpiece."

--Roger Walsh, *Essential Spirituality*

“Wilber’s writings awaken and stimulate the mind and imagination of whoever is fortunate enough to read him. Wilber is the most passionate philosopher I know.”
--Rollo May, author *Love and Will*

“Ken Wilber is, in my opinion, the most influential and prodigiously beautiful philosopher of our time. His mind authenticates genius. His books are far more than brilliant and startlingly unprecedented. His character exudes the subdued charm of one who knows way too much for the common good. As both person and writer, Ken Wilber is glorious....”
--David Deida, author *The Way of the Superior Man* and *Instant Enlightenment*

“A stunning display of genius.”
--Alex Grey, painter, author *The Mission of Art*

“One of the most significant books ever published.”
--Dr. Larry Dossey, author *Healing beyond the Body, Reinventing Medicine*

Some might notice that the David Deida quote is from a short essay he did on Ken called, “Ken Wilber Is a Fraud.” Many people rather completely misunderstood that essay; David is one of Ken’s good friends—he repeats often in the essay, “I love Ken”—and the point of the essay was that Ken’s goodness was killing Ken’s greatness, a sentiment particularly sparked by two items (this is a Reader’s Digest version of complex issues, so forgive if they’re not detail accurate): one, David said that SES was the greatest piece of spiritual writing ever produced, and hence that book had made the genre obsolete, so that even Ken should stop writing (and continuing to do was just “fraudulent”); and two, watching Ken work so hard to get Integral Institute started, where Ken’s conventional decency was killing his crazy-wise core, it was another incidence of Ken’s goodness killing his greatness—because Ken was both (“Ken Wilber is a good man, as well as a great man. A good man is kind, decent, caring, sincere, and compassionate to others. A great man is lovingly ruthless, and dies with no gift left ungiven”). Incidentally, David writes like that, in very sharp, cut and paste style, reflecting his own version of fraudulence. David wrote around a dozen of these types of very perceptive essays on all the well-known present-day spiritual teachers, and then asked all of them if they minded if he posted them. *Ken alone of all the teachers said okay*—every single other one of the major spiritual teachers objected strenuously to posting the piece about them, except Ken—which tells you something right there. (Ken wrote a similar cruel-love take on David called “David Deida Brings Trailer-Park Trash to the Dharma.” He has not yet posted it anywhere, although he wrote it years ago. Why not? “People will misunderstand it.”) Ken and David remain best of friends, and Ken asked David to headline this year’s Integral Spiritual Center meeting, and David agreed. Now that is going to be one Wild Night! ;-) (You can get videos of these gathering by joining www.IntegralSpiritualCenter.org or www.IntegralInstitute.org.)

We think it is fair to say that SES took the world's breath away. You categorically do not see books like that written in modern or postmodern times, where philosophers have so buried themselves in shallow minutiae and tacky obscurities that wisdom has become a lonely and abandoned orphan, near-starved to death. Larry Wachowski, who with his brother Andy also managed to take the world's breath away with *The Matrix* trilogy of films, said that "my discovering Ken's work was like Schopenhauer's discovery of the *Upanishads*." Larry didn't mean that as grandiose, he was simply trying to convey the enormous excitement that the book generated in its readership (and, by the way, Larry read SES together with his father). Ken and Larry have since become best friends (when their first ever phone call was over, Ken looked at the timer on the phone: they had talked nonstop for 3 hours). It was with SES that Michael Crichton first wrote Ken—and so on with many individuals who have become his good friends ("Anybody who is famous will tell you that the best thing that comes with the job is not the money or the fame, but the people you get to meet because of it. It's certainly true in my case; my life is so enormously enriched because of these people, who are, in fact, my heroes and heroines—it's surreal, actually").

Here are several relatively short review articles of SES, running from around 5 to 15 pages. These are included simply for convenience and for the historical record, if you will. We have included them as separate pdfs, so you can access them independently. Generally, we will include the first paragraph or two here, and then you can read more if you wish by clicking on the pdf link. (Incidentally, many of these are from the famously yet-to-be-posted *Kindred Visions*, so stay tuned for other parts, including original integral visions written by David Chalmers, Charles Taylor, John Searle, Robert Kegan, and almost 50 others....)

The first SES review article is by Dr. Dean Kehmeier, with special emphasis on Christian mysticism.

No summary of this book is possible. The book, all 524 pages of text and 239 pages of notes, *is* a summary, which should reveal the depth and breadth of its scope. The title indicates only some of its subject matter; the title of Wilber's own attempted summary--*A Brief History of Everything*--is more accurate. I offer here a few "clips" (as in a movie preview), to encourage you to get and read the book, with a few personal thoughts, as three corollaries and a question. [Read more](#)....

A quick note about his first sentence (i.e., that you can't write a summary of SES because SES is a summary). That's more true than even that scholar might have realized. Several of us have seen some of Ken's old notes taken for SES: a single chapter in SES is usually the distillation of over 20 legal pads of notes, with each page in the legal pad written in letters so small and dense, a single page has thousands of words on it. A single legal pad we looked at had in-depth notes on Spinoza, Bordieu, Foucault, Nietzsche, Whitehead, Taylor, all of which were for only one endnote! During his study phases, Ken notoriously goes through 3 or 4 books each day, speed-reading the less important ones but slowing down and spending days or weeks with more important

books. If you look at one of those books, they are usually underlined in three or four different colored inks, reflecting the number of times he's read it, using a different pen each time. Almost every sentence Ken writes has that type of research behind it, hammered on the anvil of enormous erudition, as so many reviews by specialists have attested. Wild generalizations or crass lumping is exactly what Ken is not about.

Here is a review more for the scholars, by Dr. Roger Walsh (we'll hear again from Roger with *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, because he can always be counted on to give a superb summary and assessment). Dr. Walsh holds three professorships at the University of California, Irvine, and yet in the review he candidly admits something that relates to what we were just saying: "The book covers so many topics that probably no one person could hope to give informed critiques on all of them. I suspect that this book will be the topic of specialized critiques by disciplinary experts for several decades."

Scientific disciplines have been suffering from an embarrassment of riches. As data accumulate and disciplines fragment into subdisciplines, the search for some comprehensive synthesis seems both more appealing and more hopeless. Take psychology for example. From its humble beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century it has now exploded into a cacophony of competing schools and therapies. The cries and handwringing over the need for synthesis have grown increasingly distraught. Consequently it is not surprising in that the appearance of a book in 1977, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, which seemed to offer just such a synthesis, was greeted with great excitement--even though written by a young unknown author, Ken Wilber, who was not formally trained as a psychologist. Indeed, in some ways *Spectrum* did more than had been hoped for because it offered a synthesis of not only Western psychologies but Eastern ones as well.

Other equally encompassing books by Wilber soon followed, such as *The Atman Project*. Here, Wilber integrated diverse developmental theories, again of both East and West, into a unified view that traced development from infancy into normal adulthood and then into post conventional stages "beyond normality" described by diverse contemplative disciplines. In *Up from Eden*, he used his developmental model as a framework to attempt to map the evolution of human cognition and consciousness. Other works on sociology, religion, philosophy and physics soon followed. By 1987, Wilber had created an interdisciplinary collection of rare scope and integrative power.

Then followed a painful silence of more than five years. These were hardly uneventful years for Wilber. Ten days after their marriage, his wife Treya discovered a breast cancer and the next five years were devoted to helping her manage the disease and eventually to die. A further two years were devoted to mourning and to writing a moving book *Grace and Grit* chronicling her life and death. Now Wilber has burst out with another major work, by far his largest to date, and what he describes as his first "mature work." [Read more....](#)

Here is one marked more by enthusiasm than anything else, but it beautifully captures the excitement that this book elicits:

This is the book I wish I could have written, and Wilber accomplishes it with true virtuosity. It is a tour de force--it successfully integrates the deep structural patterns and developments in all the major disciplines and fields of experience.

I'm not kidding--he really seems to have done it! It's an incredible achievement, both of scholarship (this guy appears to have read, retained, and quoted just about every major work I can think of!), and of original, world-transforming thought. I think it is destined to become one of the most important books of our century and will probably become a classic in a number of fields.

Essentially, what Wilber has done is to present an integrated theory of evolution that applies equally well in all areas of science, experience, and abstract theory. He enumerates a number of deep structural themes and interrelationships in the evolution of the physical world, life, the brain, the mind, belief systems, cultures, and societal systems. Wilber ties it all together with a new systematization of evolution and holons, which he backs up with extensive analysis, evidence, and detailed example. Whether you are a scientist, a mystic, historian, artist, therapist, or politician, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* will provide you with a powerful paradigm shift that may change the way you think for the rest of your life. [Read more....](#)

Many flatland environmentalists and ecologists were enraged by the book, primarily because, in our opinion, Ken gave hard-to-beat arguments about the flatness of their approaches. The irony is that Ken of course agreed with many of their central guiding ideas and the profound importance of their field (didn't he name the book *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality?*), but he found a more integral and accurate way to accomplish the intended results, thus rescuing their fields from monological methodologies (exactly one of the things that they themselves criticized, whereas they were inadvertently exemplifying it). Still, it was devastating for many of them. But some saw immediately the necessity to recast ecology in a more integral format.

One was Chris Desser, who, among other things, was the director of the very first Earth Day. Her response to SES was extraordinary for how it resonated and agreed with the deep importance of integrating Ascending and Descending, as well as integrating all four quadrants, if we want environmentalism to succeed at all. Here she is:

Ken Wilber's *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* ("SES") is an important book arriving at a critical moment. More than a remarkable synthesis of the evolution of Indo European philosophical, psychological, sociological, and scientific ideas, *SES* cogently makes the case that the integration of various differentiated realms--science, art, and morality; male and female; ecology, technology and spirituality; I, we, and it--is the central task for this fractured, postmodern time, indeed that evolution and our survival depend on our success.

My own endeavors and interests traverse similar territory (*i.e.*, spirituality, psychology, philosophy, ecology) and encompass similar concerns (exploring and understanding the opportunities for, and conditions necessary to, evolving toward ever greater levels of consciousness). As an environmentalist I have encountered the “flatland” mentality of many environmental activists and thinkers. I also meditate (vipassana) and in the last couple of years have spent a lot of time on retreat. I find the exclusively “ascended” perspective of vipassana troubling, but the practice of great value. Recently I have been grappling with how to reconcile—or integrate—the “descended” nature of my work with the “ascended” nature of my practice. I have been frustrated by the inability of participants in those two realms to understand the importance of the other (this problem is succinctly summarized by Wilber at p. 521). Thus I read *SES* with particular interest, noting questions and observations along the way. (All the page numbers refer to *SES*.)

Although my work has been in the realm of environmental activism, my concern is the evolution of consciousness. I have focused on the environment for two reasons: first, because I believe that without an ecologically intact planet, there won’t be a place from which human consciousness can evolve (this is where we live now; or as Wilber puts it “destruction of the biosphere guarantees destruction of the noosphere” (p. 94)); second, because environmental degradation is causing significant harm and suffering and I feel compelled to help alleviate that, however modestly.

My background includes undergraduatehood at Berkeley in the early seventies. I studied philosophy (Searle, Feyerabend, Dreyfuss, etc.), linguistics, cognition and rhetoric (the department where structuralism and semiotics lived). My interest in these subjects remains unabated and integral to my thinking about the work I do. Rarely, however, do I meet anyone who understands the relevance of these matters to ecology or activism. Few people understand environmentalism in terms of the continuing evolution of consciousness or spirit. And I do not often encounter writers and thinkers who meaningfully connect these dots. From this perspective it was both exciting and a relief to read *SES* because it ameliorated a sort of intellectual isolation that I experience when I try to talk about my work in a comprehensive context or why I do it. [Read more....](#)

After that longish review, here is a relatively short one, by David Boadella, included for its succinctness. Note, among other things, the oft-repeated perception that Wilber manages that most difficult of tasks: both differentiating and focusing like a laser, yet integrating and including like a searchlight—again, a comment that itself can only be seen from turquoise or higher:

Not breakfast reading, nor a book to slip into your pocket, Ken Wilber’s blockbusting magnum opus is the first part of a trilogy on the Kosmos. “Kosmos” with a capital K is used to indicate this is a book not only about physical nature, and human nature, but also about spiritual nature.

Wilber's theme, for 524 pages (and over 200 pages of endnotes), is a vast one: the web of life and the pattern of connection between levels of existence; the past, present and future of our gender relationship as man and woman; the evolution of consciousness towards awareness of the essential ground from which all differentiations and individuations are supported, among numerous other, equally significant topics.

Moving easily across this huge tapestry, from cosmology to biology, from ecology to sociology, from anthropology to psychology, and from philosophy to spirituality with apparently equal ease, Wilber is master of his elements. Against the pathological dualisms that split nature from culture, science from religion, men from women, and which create a schizophrenic image of God, Wilber offers basic polarities of reality within which we need to explore creative synthesis. Starting with "twenty tenets," which govern what he calls patterns of existence, laws of form, or tendencies of evolution, Wilber constructs a cartography of the emergent properties of the Kosmos in a way that unfolds both the depth and the breadth of the interconnected systems into which both world and world views are organized.

Wilber's mind combines the properties of both searchlight and laser. As searchlight he opens a beacon to encompass an integrated view of world, life, human beings and God. As laser, he probes into weaknesses and confusions in both current and ancient world views and mind-maps, to expose category mistakes, blind spots and logic jumps, and to highlight the central nodes of his organizing vision. The 238 pages of footnotes, constituting a book in itself, contain a running commentary and instant dialogue with many of the key philosophers that have anticipated or seen beyond our modernistic perspective. In addition, Wilber uses these footnotes to explore the finer points of his agreement with, or painstakingly articulated differences from, his major contemporaries: Varela, Habermas, Foucault, Berman, Rorty, to name only a handful of the dozens of heavy-weights that Wilber takes on as playful sparring partners. [Read more](#)....

Here is an exquisitely written overview by Dr. Kaisa Puhakka, which gives lie to the fact that critics can't accurately state Ken's view before they meaningfully criticize it—however rare the critic might be who manages to meet that elemental prerequisite—and Kaisa hints why it is indeed so rare:

"Why are there essents [=existents] rather than nothing? That is the question."
Martin Heidegger (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*)

"It is flat-out strange that something--that anything--is happening at all. There was nothing, then a Big Bang, then here we all are. This is extremely weird... This book is... about a possible Deeper Order. It is about evolution, and about religion, and, in a sense, about everything in between."
Ken Wilber (*Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*)

Consider a universe that accommodates interiority and exteriority, subjectivity and objectivity, in one seamless whole, privileging neither consciousness nor matter and defying reduction to any kind of foundational ontological categories. Such a universe embraces all phenomena equally and accords intrinsic value to everything from subatomic particles to Divine Spirit without leveling the qualities of things to sameness or removing all bases for judging their relative value. This is the universe described in *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. Wilber's purpose is to articulate a vision that is more inclusive, more integrative than has hitherto been offered by philosophical and scientific disciplines. His critique of the systems sciences and the ecological movement--the two champions of holism in our time--finds these to fall short of the holistic vision they claim to embrace. A truly holistic paradigm excludes nothing and therefore claims no absolute foundations and no absolute limits. Wilber fondly quotes an old joke about a King who goes to a Wise person and asks how is it that the Earth doesn't fall down? The Wise person replies, "The Earth is resting on a lion." "On what, then, is the lion resting?" "The lion is resting on an elephant." "On what is the elephant resting?" "On a turtle." "On what is the..." "You can stop right there, your Majesty. It's turtles all the way down." When it comes to the beginnings or origins of things in this evolving universe, it's turtles all the way down. But likewise, in the farthest reaches of the evolution, it's turtles all the way up.

This volume covers a vast territory across virtually all of the major knowledge disciplines--systems theory, biological and physical sciences, psychology, philosophy, critical theory, feminist theory, ecophilosophy, mathematics, chaos theory, catastrophe theory, to mention just a few. Wilber draws from the works of C. Taylor, E. Jantsch, J. Piaget, J. Gebser, J. Habermas, and many others. With the clarity and effectiveness of a superb synthesizer, he presents a birds eye view of just about everything that humans have ever sought to know and be in the four spheres of existence--the physical (physiosphere), biological (biosphere), mental or noetic (noosphere) and the Divine (theosphere). All of these spheres comprise "Kosmos." Wilber adopts this term from the Pythagoreans who had understood Kosmos as the all-inclusive unfoldment of matter, life, mind and spirit. By contrast, the modern "cosmos" has come to mean merely the physical universe. Wilber's concern is with the evolution of the Kosmos: how evolution unfolds through matter, life, mind and Spirit.

The work reviewed here is the first of a planned three volume series. It sets forth the vision of an evolving universe as a paradigm for more extensive discussions in the forthcoming volumes. The scope and detail of the present volume are already quite impressive, if not daunting. Wilber has written a streamlined version as a companion or introduction to the present volume in a highly readable dialogue form, *A Brief History of Everything*. Even so, to quote Roger Walsh, "The books cover so many topics that no one person could probably hope to give informed critiques on all of them and doing so would demand another book." In the following pages, I will simply present an overview of the central themes and discussions in *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*. These are certain to stir the reader's

thinking and no doubt in time will be critiqued by specialists in the various fields from which Wilber draws. [Read more....](#)

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EVERYTHING (1996)

Sex, Ecology, Spirituality was a best-seller for its type (i.e., 800-page, \$40 tomes), and Shambhala/Random House gave Ken carte blanche on his next book, so he wrote a simplified version of SES, but in a very unusual (yet very accessible) dialogue format. **A Brief History of Everything** sold over 100,000 copies and is still going strong, which is extremely rare for an “academic” book of any sort (10,000 is considered a winner). This is still probably the single best book to read to get a sense of what Ken is all about (often coupled with the other “everything” book to read after **Brief History**, and that is **A Theory of Everything**. And the most up to date book is, of course, **Integral Spirituality**, which is important for all sorts of tweaking, not to mention the wilber-5 appendix). Among **Brief History**'s numerous reviews, here are two of the shorter, the first from a Christian magazine (which also touches on SES), the second from a business writer:

Echoing and extending the title of Stephen Hawking's best-seller, Ken Wilber's new book is an accessible statement of the arguments of his recent magisterial *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, which runs to five hundred pages with three hundred pages of notes. The less intrepid reader would be advised to start with this book before moving on to the detail of the larger work. Wilber's work is comparable in scale to that of Arnold Toynbee, Pitirm Sorokin and Jean Gebser--I can think of no other contemporary writer with such a profound understanding of psychology, philosophy, evolutionary theory, comparative religion and mysticism. The importance of the longer work cannot be over-rated: I believe that his contribution will come to be recognized not only as the inheritance of Plotinus and Schelling but as equally important in the history of philosophy when it really recovers wisdom and being. [Read more....](#)

And a review essay from a business writer and highly successful management consultant:

Compared to *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, its 800 page, highly acclaimed predecessor, *A Brief History of Everything* is a stroll in the proverbial park. But not simply because of its shorter page count. The book has been written in an interview format, which makes it more personable, more reader-friendly, and far less intimidating than the earlier book. And Wilber's sprinkling of humor throughout is an unexpected delight. Ken Wilber has come out to play.

Yet make no mistake, this book, which centers on evolution, human development, consciousness, and spiritual realization, is no lightweight. As a distillation and

synthesis of his previous works--more than a dozen since his classic *The Spectrum of Consciousness*--there's plenty of substance here.

Nonetheless, the effect of this style of presentation makes Wilber's insights seem less "scholarly" and more immediately relevant to day-to-day life. Here's an example: Wilber suggests that, ultimately, Spirit reveals itself in three distinct ways in the physical world: through the sense of "I," the subjective or inner aspect of spirit or consciousness; through the "we" space, the community of spirit that pivots on ethics, morals, and culturally accepted worldviews; and through the "it" domain of objects and things, the measurable outer garment of Spirit studied by science.

This obvious, yet not clearly recognized, distinction was useful. As a management consultant, I have known intuitively that most managerial methodologies are predominantly "it"-focused, using the scientific method to streamline systems. That's all very well and good. At some level I have known that to neglect consciousness and the inner development and growth of individuals within an organization is to become imbalanced and fall short of an organization's ultimate potential. To do so is to cut off the left hand of spirit in expression.

But unlike before, I now possess a potent and clear conceptual model, a more expansive framework that I can share with corporate executives. From my perspective, these individuals need to embrace both domains if they want their organizations to thrive. [Read more](#)....