This and several other reviews were contained in the celebrations of Ken's work that we recently posted to KenWilber.com. The editors of the site went through the archives and pulled out dozens of old reviews, containing mostly positive criticism, and put them together as a type of celebration of Ken's work over the past 25 years. For the full collections, please see: Meta-genius: A Celebration of Ken’s Writings—Part 1, Part 2, Part 3

* * *

FIGURING THE FUTURE

“Who Do You Say I Am?”

by Dean Kehmeier

Ken Wilber’s Sex, Ecology, Spirituality—The Spirit of Evolution

I have found Your nakedness clothed with the coincidence of opposites, and this is the wall of Heaven wherein You dwell.

–Nicholas of Cusa

Introduction

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.

The corollaries concern pairs of opposites; the question concerns Jesus. In arriving at these corollaries, the above quote from Nicholas of Cusa can serve as an axiom. Or, as Martin Buber simply states, “Thou has no bounds.”

From Wilber’s Introduction:

*It is flat-out strange that something—that anything—is happening at all. There was nothing, then the Big Bang, then here we 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. It is a brief history of cosmos, bios, psyche, theos—a tale told by an idiot, it goes without saying—but a tale that, precisely in signifying Nothing, signifies All, and there is the sound and the fury.*

*What follows is a cheerful parable of your being and becoming…. This is a chronicle of what you have done, a tale of what you have seen, a measure of what we all might yet become.*

A trail, then, from valley to above timberline, and return. Wilber makes no claim about his ability to climb the peaks, merely that they exist, and that you and I might want to see—and learn to climb. Again and again this book reminded me of Martin Buber’s philosophy of the “narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed.” For
Wilber’s genius is the disclosure of the difficult, often hidden unity between opposites that like a narrow ridge, stretches up from the distant valley below and ascends into the mists above.

From the end of chapter 2, “The Pattern That Connects”:

Who knows, perhaps telos, perhaps Eros, moves the entire Kosmos, and God may indeed be an all-embracing chaotic Attractor, acting as Whitehead said, throughout the world by gentle persuasion toward love.

From chapter 6, “Magic, Mythic and Beyond,” discussing the proper place of reason and the confusion of pre- and trans-rational states:

Spirit is indeed non-rational; but it is trans, not pre. It transcends but includes reason; it does not regress and exclude it.

Many of (these) movements, alas, are not beyond logic, but beneath it. They think they are, and they announce themselves to be, climbing the Mountain of Truth; whereas, it seems to me, they have merely slipped and fallen and are sliding rapidly down it, and the exhilarating rush of skidding uncontrollably down evolution’s slope they call “following your bliss.” True spiritual bliss, in infinite measure, lies up that hill, not down it.

The great and rare mystics of the past (from Buddha to Christ, from al-Hallaj to Lady Tsogyal, from Hui-neng to Hildegard) were, in fact ahead of their time, and are still ahead of ours. In other words, they most definitely are not figures of the past. They are figures of the future.

From Chapter 7, “The Further Reaches of Human Nature,” in a section on the transpersonal domains:
Explain (mystical experiences) to someone at the rational level, and all you get, at best, is that deer-caught-in-the-headlights blank stare…. (Transpersonal stages) can be experienced only by a transrational contemplative development, whose stages unfold in the same manner as any other developmental stages, and whose experiences are every bit as real as any others.

But one must be adequate to the experience, or it remains an invisible other world…. We are to test this direct experience, not by mulling it over philosophically, but by taking up the experimental method of contemplative awareness, developing the requisite cognitive tools, and then directly looking for ourselves.

As Emerson put it, “What we are, that only we can see.”

From chapter 14, “The Unpacking of God,” discussing the future evolution of mankind:

And every I will sing of the Self, and every We will resonate with worship of the Divine, and every It will radiate the light of a Spirit happy to be seen, with dialogue the abode of the Gods and perception the home of Grace, and gone the lonely loveless self, the god of its own perception, and gone the Godless destiny of time and separation.

The blessed, blessed Descent of the World Soul: in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we all will be changed.

Perhaps it will happen after all.

And perhaps it will not.
...As always we have to make a future that is given to us. And is my strongest conviction that the Descent of the all-pervading World Soul is facilitated, or hindered, precisely to the degree that we unpack this intuition adequately.

Near concluding lines of the book:

(It is) more than a little ironic that (science) would pave the way for an evolution beyond rationality, since it has clearly demonstrated that evolution stops for nobody, that each stage passes into a larger tomorrow. And if today is rationality, tomorrow is transrationality, and there is not a single scientific argument in the world that can disagree with that, and every argument in favor of it.

These few paragraphs only hint at the richness of the text, and the line of reasoning that leads to these conclusions remains tacit. Read the book.

Woman and Man

All real living is meeting. –Martin Buber

In part Wilber’s book explores the feminist and men’s movements (the book apparently began as a letter of reply to a feminist detraction). Wilber cannot agree with feminism’s blame of men for women’s subjugation. He blames rather an inevitable lack of human mental and spiritual development. He hints at an emerging integrative and transcendent “third wave” feminism which recognizes the too often unnoticed but essential contributions of women throughout human history. Wilber:

Special rootedness in the biosphere can indeed be reasonably claimed--there is literally a million years of rich tradition of the wise woman who feels the
currents of embodiment in nature and communication, and celebrates it with healing rituals and knowing ways of connecting wisdom, a wisdom that does not worship merely the argentic sun and its glaring brightness, but finds in the depths and the organic dark the ways of being linked in relationship, that reweaves the fragments with concern, and midwifes the communions and the unsung connections that sustain us each and all. And finds, above all, that being a self is always being a self-in-relationship.

And since, for whatever reasons, throughout history and prehistory, there was a special connection between woman, nature, and body, then the integration of mind and body means virtually the same as integration of male and female--in each of us.

This points toward the inescapable need for the feminine principle, which knows and loves the divine inherent in creation, in any further human development. Apply the axiom: If I as a man relate to woman as Thou (and I must, if I wish to enter the wall of Heaven and find therein my unclothed God), there are no rigid boundaries. Her pain touches me. Her life invades mine. Her vision is there with mine, and changes me. Thus a corollary: Woman’s liberation is coincident with human liberation.

Gender differences arose very early after the formation of multi-cellular organisms. They extend into the realms of mind and spirit and will not be erased there, were that even desirable. Domination, exclusion, rejection, or neglect of one gender by another is not rooted in the nature of our shared reality and must fail. Communion is the way of this reality and our true liberation. In short, we are to love one another, and love is the
recognition of something of the holy, and of our way to it, in the other. More distant than
the starts, close than my breath, my other self:

A hand in mine;

no words rise -

God in the deep

of my beloved’s eyes.

For several thousand years, the masculine current of spirit has dominated: prophetic
spirituality with its creative fire, its thirst for truth, justice, action, becoming. Going to
the ends of the earth, building, learning. The spirit become form.

But today, the ends of the earth are as near as the internet or the airport, and cities of
more than ten million people mean ecological disaster; knowledge increasingly resembles
data that exponentially expands and overwhelms. The feminine face of holiness must
complement our hypermasculinity: spiritual growth has more to do with seeing and
loving than with doing or thinking. The will to power must cede to a willingness whose
source is a hidden love. Growth is unseen, silent, dimly but deeply felt: pine forest
growth. The light that stirs, the rains that nourish are outside conscious control, most
often outside conscious awareness. We need an inner attentiveness, receptiveness, and a
moment-to-moment turning to love: the uncreated spirit, which alone gives form
meaning.

The interplay between these currents creates heaven and earth. Literally. Wilber’s
thesis: Spirit ceaselessly births form, transforms it again and again to ever finer vessels
for Itself, and returns it to Spirit.

Eons
from rock

to fern leaf

to the touch of your hand.

Unutterable gratefulness

for each who kept the faith

in its living

and dying.

Earth and Humanity

So, waiting, I have won from you the end: God’s presence in each element. –Goethe

Wilber traces the current ecological crises (and its related spiritual crises) to the development of the Enlightenment paradigm (Man is the measure of all things, and Reason is the measure of man). While not an anti-rationalist (he spends more than a hundred pages defending the legitimate accomplishments of enlightened reason and exposing much current New Age idiocy and eco-emotionalism), Wilber recognizes the limits of reason. It deserves neither denigration nor deification. It is a necessary step in evolution’s climb; it is not the summit.

Wilber enters the realm of the spirit from the borders of the kingdom of reason. Specifically, he “turns left at mind,” goes within, and travels beyond what he calls “vision logic” (itself the stage beyond formal operational logic—and the province of creative scientific, literary, and artistic genius). In the classic contemplative quest, he crosses the mountain passes that define and defend the separate self, entering “the transpersonal domains.”
No longer protected by the anthropocentric gods and goddesses, reason gone
flat in its happy capacity to explain away the Mystery, not yet delivered into the
hands of the superconscious--we stare out blankly into that dark and gloomy
night, which will very shortly swallow us up as surely as it once spat us forth.

The consolations are gone; the skull will grin at the banquet; it can no longer
tranquilize itself with the trivial. From the depths, it cries out to gods no longer
there, searches for meaning not yet disclosed, still to be incarnated. Its agony is
worth a trillion happy magics and a million believing myths, and yet its only
consolation is its unrelenting pain--a pain, a dread, an emptiness that feels
beyond the comforts and distractions of the body, the persona, the ego, looks
bravely into the face of the Void, and can no longer explain away either the
Mystery or the Terror. It is a soul that is too much awake. It is a soul on the
brink of the transpersonal.

“The Depths of the Divine” is a tour of types (levels) of mystical experience. Wilber
indicates that only in the realm of the transpersonal can the contradictions and confusions
inherent in the previous stage of evolution (reason) find resolution. Apply the axiom: If I
as human relate to the earth as Thou, (and I must, if I am to end the emptiness and the
Terror), there is no final boundary. Destruction of the earth destroys me. We may thus
formulate a second corollary: ecology is not only scientific endeavor and political
movement. It is fundamentally a spiritual journey.

A sustainable ecology entails appropriate technology (what and how to do) and
appropriate living (what and how to be). I must adapt who I am, or more correctly, see
who I really am. No amount of intellectual understanding will strip from me the wants or
desires that result in ecological catastrophe. But the catastrophe will remove the possibility of their satisfaction (and probably will remove me too). The way out is the way in--to the life of the spirit:

\[ A \text{ moment, flown free of the violence} \]
\[ a \text{ barren earth scars in its souls,} \]
\[ for \text{ a moment I find a fine silence} \]
\[ in \text{ hollowed hollows still instants enclose,} \]
\[ and \text{ leave off a life that is broken,} \]
\[ learn \text{ of love no sorrow can rend,} \]
\[ where \text{ all prayers fall free, unspoken,} \]
\[ in \text{ the Silence that is all in the end.} \]

As life becomes simpler and ecologically sound, it also becomes more whole, and in time, holier. Joy, wonder and the presence of God are found in the simplest things. We learn to go light, in delight.

If Wilber is correct that evolution tends toward ever-deepening consciousness and the endless outwarding of spirit, we may interpret the current ecological crisis as an evolutionary opportunity. The working out of a sustainable ecology and the flowing of the breath of God through human instruments are one movement.

In a different but related way, ecology is a spiritual journey. Wilber points to personal transformation as an integral part of an ecological vision. But he distinguishes between an easy feel-good nature worship often put forth as the hope of a new ecology, and the perception of the Nature underlying all. In nature I am happy and feel whole. Before Nature I am terrified, emptied, and “holied.” The one is my playmate, the other
my God. One I’ll care for if I wish; the other cares for me. One I may sometimes love; in the presence of the other I can only adore. The one may be a stone, a leaf, a mountain. In the other these arise, exist, pass away. The one is always for me an it; the other expresses my eternal Thou. And yet by moments I may see the Nature of nature, and I learn they are not finally separate. I learn to adore the Creator by caring for creatures.

I learn that nature is fragile, that though its Nature is unchanging age to age, it will not always have a human face:

When all rivers have run to their oceans,
and all sinews lie still in the earth;
when the heavens leave off their wide motions,
and to histories no longer give birth,
when laughter and tears are forgotten
and dreams are free of fixed form--
no one and no womb to be wrought in,
where all are unbound, unborn--
to the night that knows of no dawn
and a silent eternal Song
what has been will return again.
These all that then will exist here,
and were there lips they would whisper:
“Forever and ever, amen.”

Buddhism and Christianity
The most significant event of the twentieth century will be seen to be the interpenetration of Buddhism and Christianity. –Arnold Toynbee

Wilber is a practicing Buddhist. This does not prevent him from turning to Christians (Emerson, St. Teresa of Avila, Eckhart) as prototypes for three of his four types of mysticism. A sense of hidden confluence between different spiritual currents (and modern science) emerges in this book. If I as a Christian relate to a Buddhist as Thou, (and I must, to extend Christ’s love), my thoughts, my concepts, even what I call my soul, can have no rigid boundaries. I will be entered and opened and changed by what in the Emptiness of Buddhism is the hidden fullness of the presence of Christ. Thus a final corollary, as I would put it:

Buddhism and Christianity, before they are a body of philosophy, or a prescription for moral living, or even a record of the life and teachings of their founders, are an example of and an injunction to an inner act, moment to moment, without end:

Buddhism--awaken!

Christianity--love!

Buddhism: Just as the ocean becomes slowly deeper and has only the taste of salt, so my doctrine becomes slowly deeper and has only the taste of liberation.

Christianity: You shall love God utterly, with all you are and all you have, and love others as your self:

These inner acts are not discordant. Arguments for or against one or the other occur in the conceptualizing mind. The acts themselves are beyond thought, and lead beyond thought, ever wider, ever deeper. And each of these acts, awakening and loving, is
inherent in the other. The second pillar of Buddhism, along with clarity, is compassion; the bodhisattva relinquishes enlightenment in favor of loving kindness. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). From The Cloud of Unknowing: “He may well be loved, but not thought.” A woman awakening or a man in adoration, in intense effort, or in total surrender, learns loving awareness/awareness of love.

According to Ewert Cousins, the arduous task of the Christian missionary today is not conversion but convergence. A period of Buddhist retreat may deepen Christians’ faith. Thich Nhat Hanh in Living Buddha, Living Christ mentions that he, a Buddhist monk, for years has kept an image of Christ in his personal place of meditation. And his engaged Buddhism includes activism and social work, in circumstances of extreme difficulty.

“Who do men say that I am?” (Mark 8:27)

In “This-Worldly, Otherworldly” Wilber shoots an arrow at the heart of traditional Christianity:

_The Church became absolutely apoplectic if anybody expressed a causal-level intuition of supreme identity with Godhead--the Inquisition would burn Giordano Bruno at the stake and condemn the theses of Meister Eckhart on such grounds._

_But that was an old story for causal-level Realizers at the hands of mythic believers, starting with Jesus of Nazareth, whose own causal-level realization (“I and the Father are One”) would not be treated kindly. “Why do you stone me?” Jesus asks. “Is it for good works?” The pious reply: “No it is not for good works; it is because you, being a man, make yourself out God.” His reply that “we are all sons (and daughters) of God” was lost on the crowd, and that realization led him, as it would al-Hallaj and Bruno and Origen and a long line of_
subsequent Realizers, to a grizzly death for both political and religious reasons--it was simultaneously a threat to the state and to the old religion.

...As many commentators have pointed out, if the Nazarene had in fact realized a Godhead that belongs to all, equally and fully, then there was no way he could be made the sole property of an exclusive mythology. Put bluntly, there was no way to market him. So Jesus was made, not the suffering servant of all humankind, which is all he ever claimed, but the Sole Son of Jehovah, literally.

...The realization of the Nazarene was thus placed on a pedestal and made an utterly unique property of the Church (and not directly a property of the Soul).

What then is the uniqueness of Jesus? Tradition answers: He is the only Son of God. He is the reconciliation between sinful man and God. He alone rose from the dead.

Wilber will have none of it. These he regards as the unfortunate “unpacking of God” by the mythical mindset of the society of Jesus’ birth, and of the early Church.

*In other words he was tucked downward and seamlessly into the prevailing mythology, and seen as yet another intervention in history to save a new group of chosen peoples: those who embraced the Church, the one true way and only salvation for all souls (which meant: the only way for imperial-political cohesion of the mythic empire).*

I found this chapter tough going, for Wilber’s criticism is not easily answered from the rational and experiential or even mystical mindset of the modern world. An “answer” can come only from within the worldspace of causal or non-dual mystical experience. Only those qualified in such experience could formulate any “answer,” and by definition, it would not be in only rational terms.
Nonetheless, nowhere does the divine have so human a face as in Jesus. He is easy to love as man, and in his transparency to God, to adore.

Secondly, in Jesus rests an intentionality, a purpose, originating in the silent, unformed depths of God. He lived and died with a divine mission. “Not my will but yours, Father” (Luke 22:42). In Bede Griffiths’ word, the uncreated formless Godhead “stirs,” and the world comes into being. Jesus was so moved by that stirring as to be indistinguishable from it. Wilber would not disagree with the idea of directionality in the Kosmos—indeed his book’s main arc is the recognition of such, as evolution not yet, nor ever, complete.

Finally, any “answer” must accommodate the profound experiential awareness of existence that is Buddhism, without doing violence to tradition. Is Christ dissolved in that awareness? Or do our concepts of Christ dissolve, in order to directly reveal His presence? What then remains? Who then is Christ?

For Christians on the edge of the 21st century, amid all the contradictions and confusions of our modern world, and in an environment increasingly permeated and opened by Buddhist experience, the question remains: Who is Jesus?

Looking for who I am.

(Our Father)

Beneath the silent silver river

(who are in heaven)

nightwind speaks in the pines

(hallowed by thy name.)

and moonlight fills the world.
"(Thy kingdom come)"

This unquiet widening river flows

"(Thy will be done)"

downvalley to its far home.

"(on earth as it is in heaven.)"

Embers of the evening fire glow,

"(Give us this day our daily bread)"

and old sorrows rise,

"(and forgive us our wrongs)"

go with bitter smoke toward timberline, fall as rain.

"(as we forgive those who have wronged us,)"

Eastward, the morning star shines-

"(and do not abandon us in our hour of temptation)"

in a few hours, sunrise.

"(but deliver us from evil.)"

---

Dean Kehmeier, M.D. is a pathologist in Durango, Colorado, an avid outdoorsman, and a recent retreatant at Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh’s Plum Village in France.