

What do the wisdom traditions have to offer to contemporary business education?

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Introduction

The time is ripe for a paradigm shift in business education. It is now 16 years since Daniel Goleman published his first book on emotional intelligence¹. By 1998 he was heaping on the public research findings correlating EQ with top performing business people.² Indeed many companies and business schools are beginning to change the way they train their staff and students. Yet the EQ movement can also be seen as one of new wine in old wineskins. Communication skills (despite the unfortunate label “soft”) are increasingly seen to be necessary even on common sense grounds, but without a clear moral framework and reappraisal of the purpose of business and life on planet earth, we run the risk of simply helping our workforces to do selfishness more effectively.

In 2004, Henry Mintzberg turned his guns on Business Schools themselves with his withering critique: “The MBA was first introduced in 1908; it last underwent serious revision based on two reports in the 1950s. Business schools pride themselves in teaching about new product development and strategic change, yet their flagship product, the MBA, is a 1908 degree with a 1950s strategy.³ Yet in 2008, Jopie Coetzee complains that even Mintzberg’s own International Management Program in Practicing Management retains the 1950s strategy. “Only the pedagogy has changed”.⁴ Having consulted with 146 social, business and political leaders around the world, he goes on to describe the “glass ceiling” that needs to be smashed in order to break through to the “postmodern MBA”. Below the glass ceiling he puts Business Science and Business Experience. Above he puts Philosophy, Critical Reasoning and Holism⁵.

Around the time Goleman was publicising notions of Emotional Intelligence, Danah Zohar coined the term “Spiritual Intelligence”⁶. The Crisis of Meaning in the book she later co-authored with Ian Marshall⁷ is particularly lucid and insightful. SQ, to be sure, addresses the sort of wider concerns to which Mintzberg and Coetzee are referring, and is making a

¹ Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*. Bantam Books, New York; London: 1995 Although Goleman did not invent the term, his 1995 book most certainly popularised it.

² Goleman, Daniel, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Bantam Books, New York; London: 1998.

³ Mintzberg, Henry, *Managers, not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development*, Berrett Koehler Publishers, San Fransisco: 2004, 7.

⁴ Coetzee, Jopie, *A Social Contract with Business as the Basis for the Postmodern MBA in a World of Inclusive Globalisation: A Critical Metasynthesis*. Dissertation.com Boca Raton, 2009, 18

⁵ Coetzee, Jopie, *The Postmodern MBA: Breaking the Glass Ceiling*. EFMD Global Focus, Vol 4 Issue 2 2010, 43.

⁶ Zohar, Danah, *Rewiring the Corporate Brain: Using the New Science to Rethink How We Structure and Lead Organizations*. Marcel Dekker, New York: 1997

⁷ Zohar, Danah and Marshall, Ian, *Spiritual Intelligence: the Ultimate Intelligence*. Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2000, 18-36

positive contribution to the process of change, but in presenting itself as a quantifiable measure along with its parallel concept “spiritual capital”, it too runs the risk of being new wine in the old wineskin of mainstream functionalist discourse⁸.

In such an environment, what contribution can the ancient wisdom traditions offer, and in particular, what contribution can the “Solomonic” tradition make?⁹ In 2008, my colleagues and I took nine secondary school teachers through a nine month course which expanded our existing Relationships Course¹⁰ into a something we now call Habits of the Heart¹¹. We have continued to develop and teach the course, and the material forms the basis for half of a Leadership module we are presently piloting with eight MBA students. As we address the question at the beginning of this paragraph, we will therefore reflect heavily too on our own experience over the last two and a half years.

Wisdom v knowledge

Dallas Willard tells the story of a Harvard student who complains to her professor of a fellow student getting top grades in his ethics classes whilst displaying elitist and sexually offensive behaviour towards her¹². This compartmentalism of intellect and behaviour is foreign to the ancient world in which knowledge and experience blend together in a rich rainbow of qualities broadly categorised as “wisdom”¹³.

We routinely tell this story at the beginning of “Habits of the Heart” and our MBA module on leadership. Immediately the ancient wisdom tradition begins to do its work, challenging the very foundations of western education, and introducing the pedagogy that will characterise our own teaching style, linking together public and private, sacred and secular, work and home life in an integrated whole.

The tree

*He will be like a tree planted by streams of water
Which yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither
Whatever he does prospers.*¹⁴

Although we do not normally quote this saying, this wisdom psalm aptly expresses the backdrop to one of the early exercises we give to all our students - to spend 10 minutes looking carefully at a tree and considering what lessons it has as a picture of life. This

⁸ For a description of Functionalism, see Mabey, Christopher and Finch-Lees, Tim, Management and Leadership Development, Sage, London: 2008, 51-75

⁹ Because of his familiarity and reputation as a wise man, I choose to use the term “Solomonic” to refer to the Hebrew Wisdom tradition.

¹⁰ See www.awi.org.uk

¹¹ See appendix for a course summary

¹² Willard, Dallas, The Divine Conspiracy. HarperCollins, London: 1998

¹³ See Proverbs 1:1-6

¹⁴ Psalm 1:3

resonates especially well with Hindus¹⁵, for whom nature functions in a similar way to the Solomonic tradition.

Part of the beauty of this exercise is its universal connectedness to the worldviews of materialism and pantheism as well as the monotheism of the Abrahamic faiths. All three worldviews regard life on planet earth as interconnected. Metaphors of human life can thus be found in animal and plant life, and even in “non-living” things like rivers and mountains.

Few of the participants on our courses will be thinking consciously about these connections. But they generally appreciate being instructed to spend more time in nature, to pace down and to consider what lessons may be locked up in a nearby tree. We are thereby connecting at an experiential level with what they instinctively know to be true. It is at this experiential level that we can often find the most effective global common language.

The path

In his appeal for management development to consider discourses other than the Functionalist, Chris Mabey notes that for the Interpretivist the journey is more important than the destination, the process more important than the outcome¹⁶. But business students and managers find it quite hard to speak anything but Functionalist language within the corporate environment. The simple metaphor of the path helps people shift from a focus wholly or mainly on outcomes or on organisational rigidity to a sense that even business life might be a journey of discovery, in which new creative possibilities can unfold and in which adventure and uncertainty can be viewed as an asset, not a liability.

Coaching and Mentoring

Following right on from the concept of journey is the concept of journeying together, for exploration and adventure feel much safer and healthier when you have someone more experienced to share that journey with. This particular aspect of ancient pedagogy¹⁷ chimes well with emergent 21st century practice, and we find that a blend of both coaching and mentoring offers a powerful combination. But in our spirituality and leadership courses, alongside the characteristic questioning of the coach and the characteristic self-disclosure of the mentor, somewhere in the space between facilitator, coach and student, we still press into service some of the less familiar tutoring techniques of the ancient sages, such as the use of proverbs and riddles¹⁸.

Body bits

¹⁵ One of the Hindu school teachers we trained instantly recalled that her mother gave her precisely the same exercise as we had, reminding us of the widespread use of the tree metaphor in traditional societies.

¹⁶ Mabey, Christopher and Finch-Lees, Tim, *Management and Leadership Development*, Sage, London: 2008, 77-100. Chris now prefers the term “Interpretivism” to the narrower “Constructivism” employed in his book.

¹⁷ Proverbs seems to envisage a blend of what we would today call mentoring and coaching. The father-son images of chapter 23 resonate more with life-mentoring, whilst the cryptic approach to teaching inherent in the “the sayings and riddles of the wise” (1:6) resonate more with coaching.

¹⁸ Proverbs 1:6

Another pedagogical technique of the wisdom traditions is the use of body parts to discuss wise behaviour, notably the eyes, ears, tongue, hands/feet as well as the heart (referring to mind, will and emotions, close to what we might today call “the spirit” or the “inner self”¹⁹). The set of subcategories now enshrined in the spiritual inventory we use initially came from a study of the Hebrew word “leb” (heart) in Proverbs 10-22.

Consequences

One of the changes called for by Coetzee is a switch from quarterly accounting to intergenerational accounting.²⁰ Helping people out of their short-term blinkeredness and into considering long term consequences is something the wisdom traditions are particularly good at, and many voices are now calling for business leaders to collaborate in the preservation of the planet for future generations. Such wisdom grows most effective over a long period of time, and in this respect, the pre-modern Solomonic tradition - like all the great wisdom traditions of the world - has an advantage over its much younger brother, “postmodernity”.

What special contribution can the Solomonic tradition make?

Although I have been quoting specifically from the Solomonic tradition, our discussion so far has drawn on the general milieu in which the world’s wisdom traditions function. The interdependence of the Solomonic tradition with neighbouring wisdom traditions is now widely acknowledged²¹, and it is no surprise that the love of dialogue among the ancient sages has generated a set of insights and practices that we may reasonably call “universal wisdom” in which there is mutual borrowing across different traditions. All truth is God’s truth, and especially when dealing with a broad range of international students, we gladly draw on insights from the East (notably Gandhi) and the South (notably Mandela)²². But the Solomonic tradition stands out in two special ways.

Holistic v Platonist Anthropology

The very mention of the word “holistic” in the 21st century seems to create a warm feeling of security and relevance. Though Platonistic thought patterns still prop up the sacred-secular divide, they have become very fragile, especially within Christendom itself where Plato has had more influence than most of us realise.

For example, it is still very common to see Luke 2:52 unpacked in a typically dualistic way. “Wisdom” and “stature” become “mental” and “physical”. “Favour with God” and “Favour with men” become “spiritual” and “social”. Thus we create a simple compartmentalised grid for growth. We have also set ourselves up to reinforce our western tendency to regard physical, mental and social growth as unspiritual.

¹⁹ Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Moody Bible Institute, Chicago: 1980

²⁰ Coetzee, Jopie, The Postmodern MBA: Breaking the Glass Ceiling. EFMD Global Focus, Vol 4 Issue 2 2010, 43.

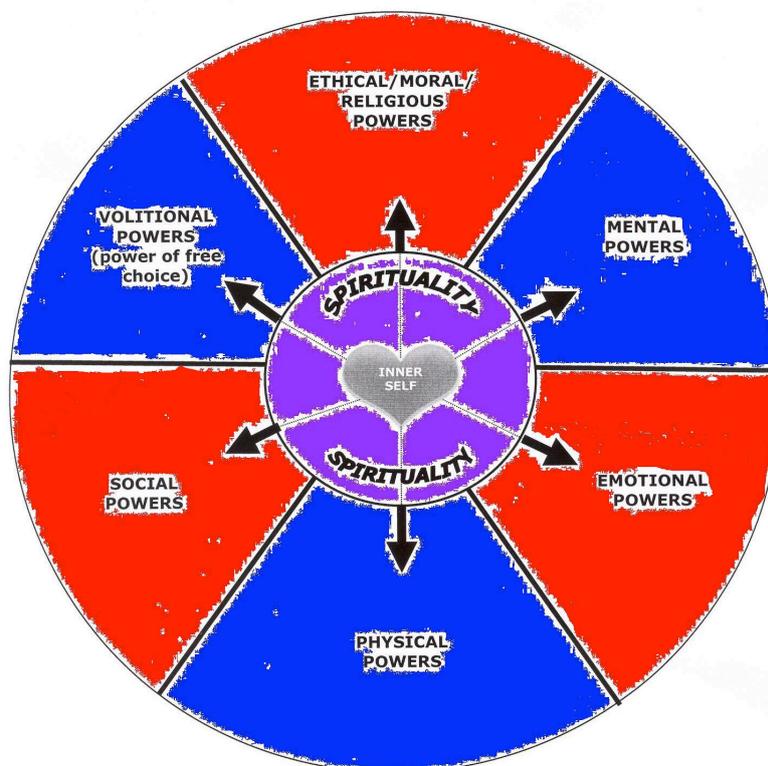
²¹ The most striking being the relationship between Proverbs 22-24 and the Egyptian sage Amenemope

²² In the article above, Coetzee is also calling for an MBA which draws on insights from the East and South as well as the West.

Had we read this verse instead through the eyes of a Hebrew sage, we might have seen wisdom and stature as one way to describe the whole person (the inner heart attitudes and the outward manifestations of eyes, ears, hands, feet etc to which they are intimately connected). We might have seen “in favour with God and in favour with men” as another way to describe the totality of life, summarised in terms of love for God and neighbour. Such synthetic parallelism was an archetypical wisdom approach, dominating much of the book of proverbs.

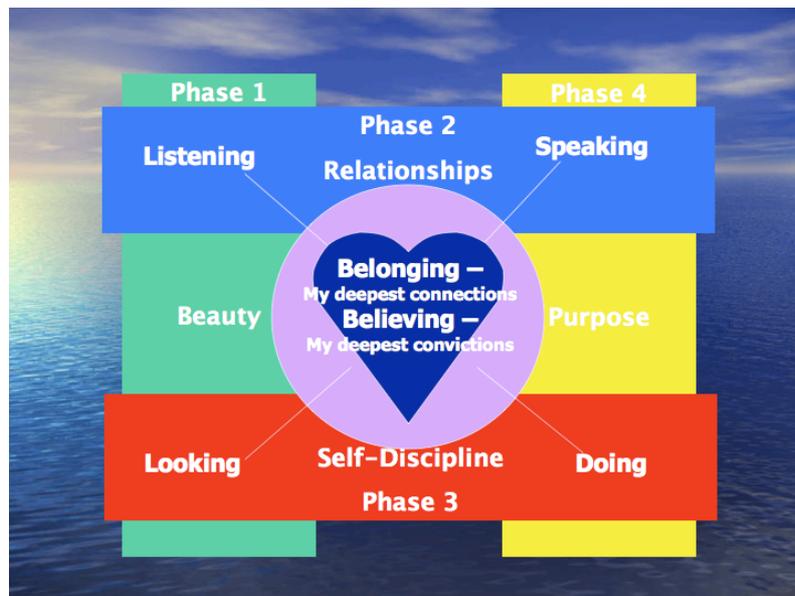
The following model from the world of Chemical Dependency as long ago as 1985, with spirituality at the centre, resonates far better with the Hebrew way of thinking, though it still carries the danger of being interpreted dichotomistically around the periphery.

LIFE POWERS WHEEL OR CIRCLE OF LIFE



After McAuliffe & McAuliffe (1985) *The Essentials of Chemical Dependency* Vol 1 page 55

Building on the externals of eyes, ears, tongue, hands/feet, and the centrality of the heart, we have built the following model, in which various additional connections are observed at the intermediate level, reflecting the ways in which the body bits are perceived to be connected to one another, especially to the heart. While we use the intermediate level (beauty, relationships, self-discipline, purpose) as a logical linear framework for our course (starting from the most accessible and easy to change), in every phase of the course we move in and out of the centre embracing both the inner and outer aspects of personal growth and transformation. Despite the historic grip of Platonism, this diagram seems to make immediate sense to almost everyone who sees it.



A Relational Ontology (1:7; 9:10)

It is no accident that “The fear of Yahweh is the beginning...” appears at the end of the opening (1:7) and at the beginning of the close (9:10) of the extended introduction to the Solomonic collection (ch1-9) with its powerful contrasts of wisdom and folly. Derek Kidner points out that this is not merely a prudential policy of cultivating the powers that be. It is about accountability to a God who is passionate about justice.

“The moral factors always take precedence”, says Kidner. “To be sure, Proverbs is concerned to point out that what is right and what pays may travel long distances together but it leaves us in no doubt which we are to follow when their paths diverge.²³”

During the Relationships phase of our spirituality training, we ask our students to reflect on a series of proverbs which, for the first time, includes one about “the Lord”:

*“The Lord detests lying lips
But he delights in men who are truthful”²⁴*

“The Lord” is, of course, the covenant God of Israel, Yahweh, a God of truth and integrity, unlike many of the surrounding deities who were capricious and unpredictable. Our hearts contain our deepest convictions and our deepest connections. If our closest friends or family members seek to influence us against our better judgment, then these two can come into conflict. But if we cultivate a love for one who embodies truth and justice, then the conflict is limited, especially if we do it in the context of a whole community with the same desire. Note the emotional content of the verse. This is more than mere assent to a set of moral principles. It is about love for a person.

This relationship defines Israel’s search for wisdom, which is frequently depicted as a love affair. The Book of Proverbs opens with the great search (1:1-7) and closes with the great

²³ Kidner, Derek. Proverbs. Tyndale. Leicester: 1964

²⁴ The full text we give the students is Proverbs 12:14-22, referenced simply as “some sequential proverbs from the Solomonic tradition”

find (31:10-31). During the first nine chapters, the theme dances to and fro between cultivating and affair with lady wisdom/avoiding getting seduced by folly with cultivating love for the “wife of your youth”/avoiding entrapment by the adulteress. By chapter 31 Lady Wisdom has somehow become incarnated in “the perfect wife”.²⁵

We make this connection explicit in the Habits of the Heart course when we categorise together “God”, “Intimacy” and “Accountability” under the overall heading “Covenant Relationships”.

In our MBA pilot module, we pointed out to students that their concept of God will have a deep influence on their behaviour, and invited them to consider whether they see God as a policeman, a conductor, a coach, a slave, as having been made redundant, or as something else²⁶. Such a question will feel familiar to business leaders who have been asked to consider the colour or animal or gender etc which best represents their brand, and can defy traditional religious stereotypes and provoke more creative and critical thinking.

Although these various conceptions of God are not incompatible, Victor Hugo has powerfully demonstrated the tension between the cosmic policeman and the cosmic slave.²⁷

Despite the power of redemptive (and sometimes unidirectional) love, the goal of intimacy espoused in proverbs remains the higher one.²⁸ One of the books that helps students explore the origins of intimacy from a biblical perspective is Elaine Storkey’s “Search for Intimacy”. Just as in the tree exercise explained earlier, we connect at a experiential level with the universal human longing to love and be loved, and allow students to explore the origins of that longing if they so wish.

If we think a student is ready for it, we will also give them a specially recorded audio CD with the whole of Proverbs 1-9.

Conclusion

Whilst we acknowledge and draw heavily on the insights of both EQ and SQ, we reject the way these concepts tend to be imprisoned within an exclusively functionalist framework. Although the numerically based spiritual inventory we use at the start of our Habits and MBA has a semblance of functionalism, it is really nothing of the sort. There is no attempt at objective measurement, and it is only a fast and efficient way to access what the student

²⁵ This mutual metaphor is reproduced in Ephesians 5:22. (Is this really about marriage or is this really about Christ and the church?)

²⁶ In the MBA module, we introduced these particular images through Victor Hugo’s Javert, Carl Jung, Proverbs 8, Philippians 2 and Richard Dawkins.

²⁷ The former represented by Javert, the latter represented by both the bishop and Valjean. Eventually Javert can no longer live with the tension and he commits suicide. Because of the global popularity of the musical version of *Les Miserables*, we use this storyline to explore notions of justice and forgiveness on our MBA module. I use the term “slave” to translate δουλος as more edgy and shocking than “servant” in Philippians 2, which is surely the inspiration behind Hugo’s overarching story of transforming forgiveness.

²⁸ As John 15:15 seems to confirm. And we take care in our course to include friendship in our definition of intimacy, as well as a lifelong lover.

is most concerned about, creating an agenda for personal growth and some markers to celebrate possible progress.

The wisdom traditions are refreshingly free from the passion to measure everything with mathematical precision. Their holistic pedagogy, the metaphors of tree and path, the addition of proverbs to the toolkit of the coach/mentor, the consideration of various body parts, including the heart, and the emphasis on consequences all offer a rich range of teaching tools for the business educator wanting to step outside the sometimes stifling atmosphere of functionalism.

The holistic anthropology of the Solomonic tradition is quite similar to that of Zohar and Marshall, but is made especially accessible to the non-expert through the availability of proverbs which link together the various body parts. Because it draws from a set of traditions much older than Plato, it has also been kept free of the Greek influences which have penetrated both Hinduism and Christianity.

Finally the relational ontology of the Solomonic tradition leads us to make explicit the link between intimacy, accountability and God, and to invite students to consider the universal search for intimacy among human beings as a clue to the truth at the heart of the universe. It's playful and provocative approach inspires us to ask bold and outrageous questions about ultimate meaning that we might otherwise never dare to ask in a business environment. We have confidence that if we keep stripping back to basic motivations and ultimate questions that we will lead our students to discover the truth about the universe for themselves. We will be able to build the kingdom of God with complete integrity because we will lead our students to the source of wisdom who will do his own powerful work in the hearts of those who truly seek him.

Appendix: Habits of the Heart – Summary

Course Aims

To help participants to become more fully human by

Appreciating beauty

Building effective relationships

Clarifying a life purpose

Deepening self-awareness and self-discipline

Embracing new life skills

The Spiritual Inventory

The course begins with a 54 question spiritual inventory, conducted 1-1 by a coach who will normally continue to work with the same person throughout the year. This inventory often forms part of the decision-making process for those considering signing up for a course. The coach will then feed back a summary of the inventory through a two page report, offering pointers and suggestions the individual may wish to follow as the course progresses, based on their inventory scores. Each participant will repeat this inventory in the middle and at the end of the course, measuring progress against their own ideals and goals.

The Course Structure

The course then proceeds in four phases. Each phase is two to three months long, consisting of spiritual exercises aimed at forming and retaining good life habits, a 1-1 coaching session in the middle, and a 90 minute group session at either end. Each group session rounds off the previous phase and introduces the next. Each phase invites participants to consider both external behaviour and deeper heart issues.

Phase 1: Appreciating Beauty

Recognizing and appreciating beauty is a prerequisite to creating it. But it's easy to rush through life not noticing or dwelling on beauty in its many-splendoured forms. We work on this area first, exploring our connections with culture and nature, because it offers the fastest progress in the shortest time. Most people instinctively know how to energize themselves better through their eyes and ears - they simply need to get on and do it. But we also ask participants to carry out an exercise in which they reflect on what would constitute a "beautiful" and "successful" life for them.

Phase 2: Relationships

Some of the most awesome beauty in the world can be seen in the remarkable creatures we call human beings. Sadly they can be some of the most ugly too. So at the start of this second phase we provide some training in communication skills at a level determined by the inventory scores of the group, and we invite participants to practice these skills during the weeks following. This time we invite participants to go deep by starting work on a life map. An optional enhancement to the course is available for individuals or companies which have previously identified relational skills as an individual or corporate weakness. This enhancement seeks to build Emotional Intelligence in more depth, setting it in the context of integrity, moral courage and an others-centred paradigm. It involves an extra five hours of contact time.

Phase 3: Self-discipline

Self-discipline is largely about connecting well what we **see** with what we do. On the one hand, there is the principle of delayed gratification. One of the things that distinguishes us human beings from the animals is our ability to reject what comes naturally in favour of a higher goal. Our boundless creativity is such that we have produced all kinds of possibilities that are bad for us. On the other hand, we **see** an opportunity to help and miss it, we **see** a chance for adventure and draw back, we **see** a vision of humanity and fail to enter into it. Avoiding the bad and pursuing the good takes focus and practice. It may also require patience and forgiveness. As self-discipline is also about wise use of resources, there is a group exercise during this phase aimed at building a culture of generosity.

Phase 4: Mission

Who am I and what do I really want? Many of the earlier threads of the course come together now in this final phase. In "The Adventure of Living", Paul Tournier describes the three phases of life as "naissance, connaissance and reconnaissance" - birth, knowledge and thankfulness. What will it take to look back on life and be thankful, when life is dominated by being more than doing, by memories more than action? What is my place

on planet earth? How do I relate to humanity? How do I see ultimate reality? Each participant is invited to give a short talk in the closing session on one such heart issue that touches on their own sense of identity and mission, fostering a culture of appropriate self-disclosure, storytelling and ongoing accountability.

Evaluation

Among the 18 participants who completed the first year of the pilot course, 81% felt that it helped them draw more energy from culture and nature, 94% felt it had helped them build more effective relationships, 94% felt it had helped them grow in self-control, 100% felt it had helped them grow in self-awareness, 78% felt they had become clearer on their life purpose and 71% felt they had developed new life skills.

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