

An Interview with Dr. Alan Briskin

‘The Power of Collective Wisdom’

Dr. Alan Briskin, an author, artist, and leadership consultant, is the co-founder of The Collective Wisdom Initiative, an informal network of practitioners and scholars interested in the field of study they call “collective wisdom.” This term refers to knowledge and insight gained through group and community interaction, as well as our living connection to one another and our interdependence. The initiative operates on the belief that groups have potential for being sources of extraordinary creative power and innovative ideas, as well as vehicles for social healing. Dr. Briskin is one of four co-authors of the book, *The Power of Collective Wisdom: And the Trap of Collective Folly* which guides readers “toward a deeper understanding of the conditions that make wisdom possible in groups and the characteristics that underlie many successful group methodologies.” The book also examines our tendencies to fall into the trap of collective folly.

Dr. Briskin lectures and leads workshops around the world on collective wisdom, and is part of an ensemble sponsoring retreats on “Leading as Sacred Practice.” LCWR communications director Annmarie Sanders, IHM interviewed Dr. Briskin about collective wisdom.



Q Could we start with your giving us some background on why you chose to write a book about the concept of collective wisdom?

Our book, *The Power of Collective Wisdom and the Trap of Collective Folly*, is the work of four writers/researchers who set out to understand “the magic” that happens in groups – what is that quality that allows something transcendent to happen? When I was first approached to be a part of this project, I suggested that we also look at what makes groups stupid. If we are going to understand one side, can we understand how the other is related? We decided that we would look at both aspects and began talking to hundreds of people and collected their stories about the transcendent things that happen in groups. The book is not meant to be a summary of what we learned over that 10-year period, but rather an extension of what we were learning.

What I learned then and have continued to learn is that collective wisdom is

both a methodology and a philosophy of interconnectedness. It’s valuable to keep in mind that 20 years ago, the word “collective” was not used frequently, and was associated with more negative things like Soviet work camps. In a similar way, “wisdom” was associated with certain individuals such as Solomon or with literature from sacred texts, and was not seen as part of or necessary for practical day-to-day life. So, by using the term “collective wisdom” we were bringing together these threads that were unfamiliar to most people’s conceptual understanding and opening up a new kind of inquiry. We were seeking the conditions that allow for collective wisdom to arise and for the reality of our interconnectedness to be a guide for humanity’s evolution toward something greater. We saw this as both practical and urgent.

Q You say in your book that we must “find ways to cooperate at a depth and scale that is unprecedented.” Would you say more about what you are seeing in the world today that convinces you that we need to focus on mining our collective wisdom?

First, we can look at the horrors that have occurred in the world – such as the

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Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda – and be reminded of what collective madness looks like, what horrors happen when we see other humans as disposable and less than fully human. I have been drawn into an initiative that is trying to transform one of these sites of horror into a place for hope. This involves building a network of peace initiatives – The One Humanity Institute – on the grounds of Auschwitz. Initiatives like this can keep us from being stuck in the horror of what we have done in the past and allow those places to become catalysts for different values. It's not that horrors such as the Holocaust won't happen again; they are happening all the time. But the promise of "Never Again" can wake us up to another way of being together, a way of living from our collective wisdom rather than from fear and retribution.

Second, the complexities of our global and national systems are outstripping our cognitive and emotional capacity to deal with the web of problems that arise. To understand this, it is helpful to distinguish complexity from complicated. Something is complicated when to understand it, you take it apart and put it back together – as an engineer does with an engine. If the engineer discovers that a piece of the

engine needs to be replaced, a new part is brought in, and the engine is reconstructed. Complexity is wholly different. Understanding something that is complex requires much more than pieces or parts being removed and replaced. Leaders of our global and national entities are beginning to grasp that systems today go far beyond being complicated and require much greater awareness of our interconnectedness to understand them. We can't any longer operate in a fragmented mechanical way but instead we must seek out patterns and perceive systems as alive and coherent.

Q You write about the "quiet confidence that our not knowing is our strength, that the ability to ask deep questions is more important than superficial answers, that imagination, patience, openness and trust in one another trump IQ." Would you speak more about this need for tolerance of uncertainty and respect for mystery?

Not knowing is an intentional act to inhibit the part of ourselves that is wired for certainty and predictability and control. "Not knowing" doesn't mean we ignore what we know. It means that what we know must be held lightly for new understanding to emerge. We suspend our knowing in order to hear other voices, to understand the system in a deeper way, to challenge our certainty and bring to the surface our underlying assumptions.

When I speak about a tolerance for uncertainty and respect for mystery, I like to reference the concept of "negative capability," a term initially articulated by the poet Thomas Keats. He described it as the capacity of being in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." The British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion later connected this term with what he observed in groups and leaders when they encounter something that is unclear to them. When we are confronted by uncertainty and doubt, he noted, we move into defensive behaviors that only make things worse.

What is really required of us to deal skillfully with uncertainty, doubt, and mystery? What I notice in organizations and groups is that when we cannot contain our anxiety or cope with uncertainty and paradox, we disperse our energy in one of three ways. One way is to become emotionally overwhelmed and this is reflected in behaviors such as avoidance, postponement, or the inability to come to a decision – not because of the uncertainties but because we are in a state of emotional fear or overload. The second dispersal is a kind of hyper-intellectualization, going into an explanatory mode, that leads to a certain emotional unavailability and shutting off the feelings that arise about a situation. The third dispersal – which may be the most common that I see in my work – is moving directly into action without thoughtfulness or consideration of consequences. So these are three ways we respond when we don't know what to do with questions that don't have immediate answers.

The root of the word "capability" is associated linguistically with the concept of holding or containing, and that suggests we need to look at the strength of our containers for new ideas to arise out of the old. I just bought pots for bamboo and was told not to buy pots that were too thin because the bamboo can crack through them as it grows. In the same way, our emotional and conceptual containers need to be strong enough to hold and cultivate new ideas that have vitality and life force. What does it mean to develop a stronger container that can hold the vital energies of life with all the mysteries and conflicts that come with it? Negative capability begins with being conscious of not moving into those dispersal energies and trusting that in the containment of uncertainty and mystery something new will arise.

One of the assumptions of developing negative capability is that the person who learns to contain the uncertainty and conflicts of a situation stops acting from their habitual defenses and starts acting with curiosity and creativity. Sometimes this means not acting immediately and



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knowing that some things need to be incubated long enough to reveal what is needed next. Suspending certainty is an intentional act that facilitates something new to arise. It's recognizing that I may not yet have discerned enough to know what is needed. It's having to stay in the suffering of not-knowing long enough for something to emerge.

The counterpart to negative capability is positive capability, a capacity I associate with higher order thinking and feeling – an epiphany which linguistically has to do with nearness to spirit. So while part of waiting involves the suffering of not knowing, it is also about creating conditions for new images to come forward. One way of evoking images that can guide us in a particular situation is to practice imagining preferred ends or outcomes. If we say we want global peace, what does this really mean? What is my image of global peace? In some definitions, peace is the absence of conflict. Is that really my image of what is needed in the world? For me, peace is not simply about the absence of conflict but instead, as Martin Luther King, Jr. noted, the presence of justice. So now I can begin imagining what justice may look like.

Otto Scharmer's work on presencing encourages us to build from that idea – within ourselves and with others -- a future we want to be a part of and co-create. Then together, we begin figuring out how to get to that positive future.

Q Do you find that people talk about wanting to let something new be created, but when they begin to see the new, want to go back to the old and familiar?

I would say that this is the habitual human response to change. When I talked earlier about dispersal -- the tendency toward being emotionally overwhelmed or intellectualizing or rushing into action -- those movements are directly associated with our desire to move back to the familiar. But we eventually discover that these coping strategies fail. Becoming emotionally overwhelmed doesn't bring me into the new. Intellectualizing it and coming up

with great ideas about what the new is doesn't bring me into the new. Doing a lot of things -- even good works -- won't bring me into the new either. Those strategies may simply take us back to the familiar and even lead us into cynicism and disappointment. The new requires stepping into the unknown and the discomfort of finding emotional and behavioral responses that are different from where we began.

Q How can we work with that habitual response to change?

Consciousness and self-awareness are essential. Can I recognize that when I become emotionally overwhelmed, I am nearing that point where new behavior is required? Can I recognize my tendency to intellectualize and see that this is stopping me from moving forward and imagining new possibilities? It also helps to cultivate social relationships that support me through the fears. Often, too often, our fears can become contagious and others simply reinforce the familiar to help us feel comfortable. However, if we cultivate friendships that support the new, we can see our ideas through the eyes of these friends and the conversations help us gain confidence that we are onto something valuable.

Socrates identified three elements that support the emergence of something new. The first is that it happens through inquiry and challenging certainty. A leader who wants to work toward change has to be able to challenge what is taken for granted, where the group is certain. This can be upsetting and unsettling for a group, and therefore has to be done skillfully. When we were working to understand the concept of collective wisdom, my colleague Sheryl Erickson used to say, "What if we didn't use that term?" I would get frustrated because that was precisely what we were doing -- trying to articulate what collective wisdom is. But she was absolutely right. We can actually learn more about something when we intentionally don't use the word or term we are trying to define. For example, imagine trying to talk about God if we could not use the word. What would we say? Trying this out can help us see

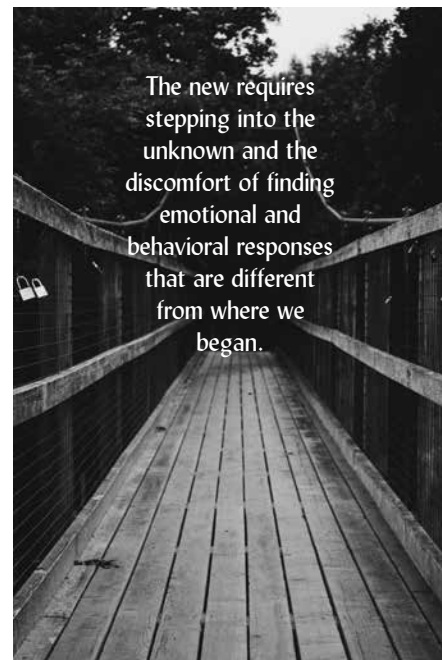
that we may be holding on to definitions (certainties) that are not helpful and which prevent us from identifying new ways of knowing.

The second element that Socrates advocated was dialogue. His belief was that we all have a glimpse of truth but in different degrees and from different perspectives. In dialogue we can articulate our assumptions and see how they differ from those of others. We can then begin to have collective perceptions that include diverse perspectives.

The third element was consideration of the Transcendent, which we might call the contemplative dimension, or those practices that allow the wisdom of the Divine within us to be brought forward.

Q You speak of the shift you see occurring where we are moving away from classical ideas that group behavior is defined by singular determinants to the idea that there is a field of collective consciousness that is "real and influential, yet invisible." How might we increase our awareness of and confidence in this field?

I describe the attention to fields as the pioneering work of collective wisdom. Think of times when you were in a group and about to say something and someone else says it. Or someone



speaks and you never knew that the person had the depth and wisdom that you hear coming from them. Or you never knew you yourself had the depth and wisdom coming out of you. All these experiences have the quality of emergent phenomena. In other words, the person voicing an insight didn't have that insight before coming into the room. It didn't even exist five minutes earlier. The notion of emergence has to do with elements coming together and creating something new. Think of sugar which is made up of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen. None of those elements has the quality of sweetness that we associate with sugar. The sweetness is an emergent aspect. If we broke apart the molecules, they would return to their non-sweet elements. So, I think we can create the conditions or social field that allows for these kinds of sweet moments to emerge.

A second area of inquiry is how energetic fields pre-exist the actual group encounter. Teilhard de Chardin spoke of a noosphere. The quantum physicist David Bohm spoke of an implicate order. Carl Jung addressed a collective unconsciousness whose inhabitants were archetypes. The biologist Rupert Sheldrake wrote about morphic fields and accessing information from these fields. Both Sheldrake and the philosopher of science, Ervin Laszlo, talked about the brain as a receptor that is able to call in information from fields that surround it.

It seems to me that the next phase of collective wisdom will be about how to access these fields, particularly the wisdom fields. I am very interested in

seeing how groups can become greater collective receptors to the kinds of fields that inspire social justice, love, and the constructive use of power. Those are the questions I live with.

Q You note that it is helpful to ask, "What is being kept to the side?" as a way of helping us be aware of the emergence of collective folly. How does this work? How can a group be vigilant about what is happening within the collective that it may not want to see or deal with? What could you say to us about how a group might become more aware of its collective shadow?

I'm reminded of a dream that Jung recounts in his memoir. He sees himself in the dream moving forward against powerful winds while holding a candle in his hand. Turning his head, he sees a shadowy figure behind him. He is doing everything he can to protect the glowing flame of the candle while knowing the shadow is pursuing him.

One of the ways I have come to understand Jung's dream is that by identifying with the light in front of us, our idealized self, we constellate a shadow behind us. The shadow has enormous creativity and power but represents a compensating perspective to our idealized attitudes. When we deny this aspect of our own consciousness, the shadow gains power over us. It turns destructive. In other words, whatever we idealize consciously constellates an opposing or compensating attitude that seeks a voice. Light creates shadow. So shadow work is not simply about

identifying some new area of self-improvement, like I can be less messy. Shadow work has to do with our yearning for wholeness and for me it is connected to a Divinity within each of us. But we have to let go of the hubris of pride and righteousness. We have to let in the other side of consciousness.

This is particularly relevant for spiritual communities because there is so much attention put onto the light that we often don't see the shadows pursuing us. Working with our shadow -- individually or collectively -- requires discernment because it is about where we place our attention, the need to respect both the aspirational light that leads us forward and the shadows constellated around us. Attending too aggressively to either light or shadow throws us off balance. Humor and kindness help a lot. It makes shadow work less threatening.

A leader's role is to inspire a worthwhile mission without ignoring or dismissing the shadow aspects. If there is shadow not being addressed by the group, then the leader must find ways to bring it into the conversation. In the end, shadow work is essential for the mission. It is a way to seek wholeness. And let's not forget wholeness is actually revealed from times when we fail, where we suffer, where we can't live up to some of our ideals and aspirations. Ralph Waldo Emerson reminded us that the crack is where the light gets in. Can we create communities that genuinely value vulnerability, that allow people to acknowledge limitations without paralyzing shame? Growth and learning are not just for interns and spiritual initiates.

Q If members look to leaders as strong, visionaries who have the capacity to bring the group forward into its mission, what's it like for leaders who acknowledge their own vulnerability to the members?

Actually, leaders can be inclined to distance themselves from vulnerability. The inclination to be removed from vulnerability is understandable, and the more others depend upon you, the less inclined you can be to live in those



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Further, leaders are often projected upon, and that is a very powerful force. In spiritual communities there is sometimes a tendency to want or need our leaders to represent the transcendent for us, and this is ultimately unfair. We are all human and need to be treated that way. This means leaders are also in need of support and feedback, but as importantly, membership in a spiritual community means working on ourselves so we don't project our fears and insecurities onto others.

In the book we focused on two central dynamics of collective folly. One is polarization, the “us versus them” mentality where we project all things bad onto one side. In thinking about

The second dynamic is false or forced agreement. We see this operative in totalitarian environments where it is absolutely essential to appear in agreement. There are often traces of this in our family lives and work environments. Individuals may align with a position simply because of a desire to be aligned with the most powerful sub-group or out of fear of being excluded. They may believe an action is wrong but not speak up. And others may not even be aware of their powerlessness. They are simply trying to get by each day doing what they know is expected of them.

While this dynamic may be more prevalent in totalitarian regimes, we can also say it happens in more benign communities, including spiritual communities. There is the urge not to stick out or to stick out only in ways that are seen as positive or are agreed upon as

A colleague of mine wrote a book called, *Intelligent Disobedience: Doing Right When What You're Told to Do is Wrong*, which I recommend as a relevant book for your community to deepen the conversation that you're having about this. I also respect the work of Paul Tillich who explores the ontological roots of justice, power, and love. His work influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. and he addresses the critical role of the individual to see beyond the social consensus. His work is an antidote to collective folly because it suggests that justice, power, and love are all about our becoming closer to our divine nature. These forces fragmented from one another or associated only with socially constructed beliefs violate the human yearning to be closer to the divine. This is where the role of conscience comes in, and discernment – that ability to see the white light of truth that runs through all things. And it means also that we can't do this alone. Truth is not an individual mental construct. It must emerge through suffering, through cultivating our negative capability, and through community. □



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