

## Glimmers: The Call of a New Way

Stephen C. Rowe<sup>1</sup>  
Grand Valley State University, USA

**Abstract:** In the genre of “pointings” or “glimmers,” here are ten short reflections on/of a life-way that is emerging in our time. They can help us in the choice to move beyond the modern way of abstraction, separation, and control, and toward a way oriented to relationship, appreciation, and quality. Each reflection identifies elements of choice as to thought, action, and embodiment.

[Stephen C. Rowe. **Glimmers: The Call of a New Way.** *China Media Research*, 17(3): 26 -34]3

**Keywords:** Relational, worldview, cancel culture, pandemic, embodiment, pluralistic, practice

The new way of being that is necessary for our survival as anything we would want to call “human” is emerging, breaking through, being ever more present in us and through us. I have tried to describe this new way before, as *relational, process-oriented, immanent, dialogical, democratic, pluralistic....* But it is elusive, like the Dao: “the Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao.”

And, in contrast with our belief and doctrine-loving Western ancestors, description or the having of a life-interpretation, is only part of the overall job of *embodiment*. Hence emphasis on *practice* and the priority of ethics in post-traditional times.

To say that description/interpretation of the new way is “process-oriented” is to say that this function of my life matures over time as I in my holistic and embodied life mature, and continue to grow beyond “adulthood” as we had known it before. This is to identify a kind of process that assumes “immanence,” the immediate presence of life’s most vital energy – to which I am more or less attuned. It is to say “relational” as well, the particular kind of relationship we point to when we say “dialogue” or “democracy,” the kind in which encounter with the other is opportunity rather than threat. And all of the above indicates that the new lifeway is also “pluralistic,” meaning that the new worldview affirms the fact that contingencies of person, time, and place mean there will be many different articulations of the new worldview, each limited and most with merits. Given the ineffability of the ultimate (and accepting the limitations of our own positions), it is possible to say these things without slipping into the swamp of relativism.

All of this makes life more complicated spiritually and culturally than it was in the traditional period of human history. There can be no orthodoxy, no catholicity like before, no established ritual, method or priesthood. Contemporary fundamentalist and ideological

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen C. Rowe is professor emeritus of Philosophy at Grand Valley State University. A second, “From Pandemic” edition of his *Overcoming America / America Overcoming* will be published later this year. Email: rowes@gvsu.edu.

attempts to “get back” to before, when things were thought to be good, only lead to fascism, as desperate and misplaced attempts to locate and coax out the vital energy.

I want to write about these things in a way that is faithful to Socrates’ most basic advice in “The Apology” (Plato, “Apology,” 38a):

I tell you that to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing a man [*sic*] can do, and that a life without this sort of examination is not worth living.

What I’m proposing with this writing project is “glimmers,” presentation of flickers, glimpses, or glints of light that come to us from time to time in the mid-zone between theory and practice, on the field of our actual living. I am trying to talk about—and from – those flashes of insight as to what I should do and think. They don’t come via linear logic, memorization of doctrine, or patriarchal assertion, but rather as intuition or an acute perception.

During the pandemic my work has consisted of two projects. I refined and contextualized *Overcoming America / America Overcoming* for a second, “from pandemic” edition, and I wrote short pieces – in something I once called “Pandemic Diary.” The latter wound up as piles of scribbles, here and there around my workspace. Now that the book, with its 2021 additions, is out of my hands, I will go through those piles, “... let[ting] no day pass,” in the attempt to identify what I take to be genuine “glimmers” – as distinct from more flash in the pan drama of my own ego. Then I want to write something from the experiential center of them, something which might be helpful in our shared vocation of emergence, literally the birthing of a new culture.

### **Worldview**

There is a lot of talk about “worldview.” It arises out of the fairly recent widespread consciousness of culture, its operations and choices. Up to our time this consciousness has been largely negative, critical of a worldview and culture that has been racist, sexist, and ecologically suicidal. We have more or less learned the critique of the European-American Cartesian culture of mechanism, isolated individualism, abstraction, misogyny, competition, a culture steeped in exceptionalism and a sense of God-given privilege legitimating colonialization and exploitation of the rest of the world.

It is against the backdrop of this awareness, and the mostly nihilistic reactions arising out of it, that some of us are experiencing a new and profoundly life-affirming worldview. I took a pass at describing it a few paragraphs ago.

I think it is important to repeat that “worldview” as description or theory is only one part of the broader assignment to *embody* a new way of living. I emphasize this because so much of the contemporary discussion of worldview reflects unwittingly the old Western prejudice of “epistemology prior,” assuming that if we can get things straight at the level of *thought*, then correct action will follow automatically. On top of this problem, there is the ancient assumption – as part of the worldview behind “worldview” – that we need to

agree at the level of metaphysics or religion in order to be able to work together, to cooperate, and enjoy each other's presence.

So the thing I want to keep in mind is that a worldview is not just an abstract and settled metaphysic or "philosophy," like a piece of pottery we can place on the mantel, though it is that in one aspect. As Karl Marx and behavioral therapy have discovered, a "worldview" is inevitably also expressive of material conditions, including the actions we are allowed to take. The relationship between worldview and action in the adventure of embodiment, then, runs both ways. From this standpoint, our worldview is the interdependent set of values and principles by which we live, as well as the actions we take on behalf of what we know is right. -- (I recall one of my greatest teachers, Joseph Sittler, remarking casually in class one day: "Mankind [*sic*] creates the truth he must when he is confronted with the deed he ought.")

### **Seeing into the Woods**

One of the few things I appreciate about winter is that you can see into the woods. Without leaves on the trees, we can see more deeply than in the lush seasons. Like looking into water when the lake surface goes calm, we can gaze upon geographical features, evidences of human activity, and even the mysterious origin of it all.

To draw the full analogy, in Pandemic I can see more deeply into the actual tissues of my life, see which practices and relationships are vital and which are unhealthy. The problem of the "brain fog" associated with pandemic provides a good example. People speak as if this is a problem that is new to pandemic, whereas looking a little more deeply we see that many great minds have observed the machine speed rather than human speed of modern life, and that as a consequence, humans are just chronically overloaded, overwhelmed, driven into the fog of scattered consciousness. Not fully ourselves.

This kind of seeing can be depressing to be sure. There are days of dreadfulness blended into late-winter dreariness, huge ecological uncertainty, and the incredulity of Trump followers who have severed themselves from whatever shared sense of sanity remained in our deeply eroded world, to live in some "alternative," post-apocalyptic universe.

But, again, some of us experience the beauty of the world like never before, the gift quality of life itself in its ordinary moments. There is a sense of gratitude in the air, a light which, in the words of Emily Dickinson, "trembles in" (Williams, 1987, p. 209). I, like many of us, seek to respond with the words and deeds available to me.

### **A New Nobility**

Actually, there are many who have recognized the emergence of a broader and deeper appreciation of life in the world, a new vision of human maturity and development, one which comes strangely out of the very disasters we have endured. I'll name three of them as recommended companions and mentors in challenging times:

Karl Jaspers, in his magnificent 1930 book, *Man in the Modern Age*, speaks of the chaos and insincerity that inevitably overtake a society dominated by technique. He identifies "personal ties" as "the only source of a new and trustworthy objectivity:" "True

nobility is not found in an isolated being. It exists in the interlinkage of independent human beings” (Jaspers, 1957, p. 210). Further, the independent human or “self-existent self” arises from our encounter with the Nothingness which is strangely both our origin and the degraded condition of contemporary society which brings it to awareness. He illuminates the paradox of Nothingness and personal ties as follows: “there is no generalizable situation, but only the absolute historicity of those who encounter one another, the intimacy of their contact, the fidelity and irreplaceability of personal ties. Amid the general social dissolution, man [sic] is thrust back into dependence upon these most primitive bonds out of which alone a new and trustworthy objectivity can be constructed” (Jaspers, 1957, p. 26).

Vaclav Havel, in his 1986 *Living in Truth*, addresses the condition of modern society as one which results from “the general unwillingness of consumption-oriented people to sacrifice some material certainties for the sake of their own spiritual and moral integrity” (Havel, 1986, p. 54). Citing the experience behind Heidegger’s saying that “Only a god can save us now,” and awareness of “the general failure of modern humanity” (Havel, 1986, p. 115), Havel describes the “existential revolution” through which both persons and society can engage in “the rehabilitation of values like trust, openness, responsibility, solidarity, love.” He specifies the center of this revolution as “living within the truth from its proper point of departure, which is concern for others” (Havel, 1986, p. 103).

Elizabeth A. Johnson, in her 1993 *She Who Is*, contributes to a movement beyond the dominant cultural paradigm of hierarchy and patriarchy, with its abstraction and isolation. But she does not want to simply substitute or mix and stir in “the feminine.” Rather, she envisions “an extensively relational self grounded in a community of free reciprocity”: “what is slowly coming to light is a new construal of the notion of the person, neither a self-encapsulated [male] ego nor a diffuse [female] self denied, but selfhood on the model of relational autonomy” (Johnson, 1993, p. 226).

Between these three figures I think we have a vision of what we can become, in fact of what we must become. They also help us understand that our urgency in the present is not without roots and ancestors, reaching as far back as the Hebrew statement that “Where there is no vision the people perish” (Proverbs 29: 18). Such a vision is profoundly lacking in our time, as we swirl in chaos, manipulation, and insincerity. Jaspers, Havel, and Johnson can be helpful as we struggle to embody a way of life that many of us perceive dimly and fleetingly, and yet compellingly. I am suggesting that, unlike so much of the often flashy but thin self-help offered today, with these authors we have real substance and real wisdom. As in the tradition of liberal education, the act of reading them can be a genuinely transformative practice.

### **Cancel Culture**

The way out of the “wasteland” on which we find ourselves requires reappropriation of some traditional resources and values that were thrown overboard in the rush of modernization; it requires some connection with efforts of the past. But any traditional value or ideal we want to hang on to and perpetuate in the present will inevitably be tainted

with values we now – in our ambiguous post-traditional transcendence of culture – find abhorrent. Hence “cancel culture.” The baby goes out with the bath....

For example, Washington, Jefferson, and founding ideals of “liberty and justice for all” are associated with slavery. Therefore cancel. Confederate flag also associated with slavery. Cancel. How, then, are we able to have access to and choose from the riches of traditional culture, bring them into the present clean and useful? Apparently we must always be prepared to admit to the limitations of their embodiment, and resist the temptation to absolutize our articulation of them.

Is it even possible for culture to become self-aware and a matter of conscious choice, or are the two inherently in mutual opposition with one another – culture and choice? Even if I can make connection with traditional resources, what is to prevent my appropriation from being merely “aesthetic” – a mere lifestyle decoration -- rather than fully “religious” or transformational? Maybe immersion in the life of a particular community is necessary. But what is to prevent this from becoming fundamentalism, a cult, or some other refusal to live in the actual, tortured present we share? Many questions; many wrong answers.

### **Socrates and AI**

For me on some days it is as simple as open versus closed.

“Open” means what Socrates was talking about in the “Phaedo” when he spoke of the importance of maintaining belief in the immortality of the soul – belief that the person, in her depths and most genuine parts, is somehow confluent with, connected to, or even identical with the ultimate reality of the cosmos (Plato, “Phaedo,” 114d). Holding this belief, there is reason for hope, aspiration, on a wide horizon of possibility -- including the choice for civility and regard for all persons, without which degradation and collapse are sure to follow.

“Closed” means we have succumbed to the human temptation to reach for more order and control than is given to us in this life. As William Barrett lays out in his extraordinarily important book, *The Illusion of Technique* (Barrett, 1978), the modern form of “closed” is the technological mindset that drives to what Peter Herschok (2001) describes as “the colonization of consciousness.”

The open way of living is what Socrates was pointing to with his famous “the one thing that I know is that I know nothing.” Coming as close as he ever comes to claiming wisdom, he contrasts himself with those he humbled in his famous encounters with experts of one sort or another: “at least I do not pretend to know what I in fact do not know.”

The center of this “limited” or “human” “wisdom” is *aporia*, the state of not-knowing sometimes described as wonder or perplexity. But this is only half the experience. For *aporia* is at the same time the state of availability through which genuine wisdom in its identity with vitality can flow.

Further, it is important to recall that Socrates was a “relationalist”: the location in the world where the experience of *aporia* is likely to occur most fully and fruitfully is in the meeting with other human beings, when we discuss matters of importance in “the examined life” of questioning “both myself and others.” Here, in this non-physical holy place, we

can receive the insight and energy we need to live well and move toward a democratic and just society.

But this development requires the opening, and the continual refreshment and hygiene of having the kind of meeting Socrates was pointing to “every day,” as “the best thing a person can do.” It is as though the false or ego-based knowing builds up over time like plaque builds up on unattended teeth, and needs to be cleared away on a regular basis.

“Artificial Intelligence,” as the greatest extension of human control that has ever occurred, threatens to extinguish the human spirit, its sorrow and suffering along with its exaltation. The 2020 CNN film, “The Social Dilemma,” presents the threat very vividly, in terms of ever-sharpening algorithms that can give us what we want and even *tell us* what we want, all in the name of nothing higher or deeper than profit – which is just another name for the most insidious form of being closed ever devised.

Over the centuries, the old “free will versus determinism” dilemma seems to widen continuously on both sides. In our time we see the possibility of robots that will be “freer” than we have ever been, and forms of control that threaten to extinguish the human spirit. In this environment, the temptation to become an engineer of one sort or another is great. The danger is that you will treat others as well as yourself as *object*, no longer as beings capable of creativity or love – as beings who have souls. Instead we objectify others who are “*known*” and thereby reduced and controlled. The problem with engineering is that, while we need to be able to make distinctions – lest we be homogenized into a boring sameness, the lure of order often takes over, and metastasizes into fascism.

### **Breaking Ice to Open Water**

Twice in this season of transition from Winter to Spring, I have seen humans breaking up shore ice in the effort to get out to the freedom of open water. One was a video from a Lake Michigan city nearby, where an ice-breaking tugboat was shown clearing a path for a commercial ship to get out of harbor and on to its next port. A second occurred on a late-winter walk, when we came upon two women (in bathing suits!) apparently wishing to join the polar bear club by smashing a path with ax and garden shovel, from the still-iced-in shore of an inland lake, out to where they could enjoy full membership.

The latter seemed a little mad, and profoundly expressive of the widely shared wish to break out of pandemic isolation and constraint. I find the metaphor helpful in an even broader sense of our not-always-joyful movement beyond not only Covid 19 and Trumpism, but beyond something much bigger, like modernity -- to the new way of being I am trying to support with this writing.

### **Pandemic Learning and Mindfulness**

We have to live consciously or mindfully. We have to be aware of what we are doing and that it is a choice we have made, which is to say we could have chosen otherwise. In the new nobility of Jaspers’ “self-existent self,” surviving the chaos of contemporary society requires that we learn to be our own boss. Living in pandemic requires this, as does living in post-traditional circumstances generally.

The order of choice indicated here is quite beyond what most of our ancestors were capable of. Mostly they were enveloped in authority and convention, only later to conceive of freedom as escape or release from constraint. Only much later, as we begin to confront the challenge of our time, do we begin to understand that freedom must be a positive vision of living well.

So the kind of consciousness we are talking about is a stretch. Mostly we are so habituated to having an external boss (who we love or hate or both) that we are in the utter confusion of outer space when we discover that self-direction is the only possible alternative to decadence, authoritarianism, incoherence – or an unacceptably superficial life.

To live mindfully, then, is to open the scope of conscious awareness of “self,” so that much of psychological function which had been known to be “involuntary” in the past becomes voluntary. It is to exercise a self-direction or self-transcendence which, because of the invisible enveloping of the past, seems new and bewildering. We need to learn the most basic lesson: It is only once I stand outside of my “self” that I can choose to do and be otherwise, including the possibility of living a life of integrity as my genuine self. Another paradox.

### **The Transactional and the Relational**

One way to understand what it means to “live mindfully” in a way that supports healthy development is in terms of two different paradigms of interaction. Here is a distinction that came close to the surface in the later days of the Trump administration, when it was observed that everything for Trump is a “deal,” *quid pro quo*, a transaction. When we are together we negotiate – you’ve got apples, I’ve got oranges.... Caring or mutuality or commitment to the other is not noticed, or is dismissed as sentimentality or projection of need, or weakness.

Relationality presupposes that I have regard for the other as a person not a thing, a subject not an object, an “end in themselves” and not a tool or a means to some end I might want. This is probably the oldest and most basic distinction in Western ethics.

The relational presupposes the space of our encounter as an open space in which discovery or emergent truth (*alethea*) might occur. It also presupposes some degree of the maturity in which I can see myself and my interests as elements of a work in process, so I do not have to freeze my position into hardened ideology and thereby cut myself off from that contact with the other which might enrich my life.

This is asking very much developmentally. It suggests that the maturity involved in the relational paradigm is not only a prerequisite for its actualization, but also a practice through which that maturity can be generated (with major implications for education and family life). Affirmation of this point, it seems to me, is a prerequisite for any culture we might choose to associate ourselves with.

### **Meditation and Justice**

An old Japanese saying goes something like this: “Easy to meditate in the monastery, more difficult in the home, most difficult in the world.” In other words, the end of

meditating is to stop meditating. It is to no longer have one's meditation be a separate and special activity, but a way of life – "Zen is your ordinary life." It is return. The high religious figure is not the one who leaves in glory, but the one who remains present with and for others in compassion.

I am not there yet, though I can appreciate the point about relationality being a practice, imperfect though it (like sitting meditation) always will be. Both relationality and meditation connect us to life's deepest and most reliable wellspring of energy, and to an embodiment which is joyous and just.

Before the time when I am able to embody this paradox, I "sit" in meditation. I both "think nothing" and focus, engaging both ends of the continuum between "emptiness" and "suchness" in Buddhist terms. In more contemporary terms, through the cognitive-behavioral discoveries of neuroscience via authors like Arthur Zajonc (Zajonc, 2013) and books like *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1993), meditation is clearing the mind of its endless chatter, moving toward complete emptiness; and at the same time it is learning to actually focus – after a lifetime of flitting around from one thing to another without pausing long enough to ever be *present*. Here too, we learn to live with vital paradox.

In this practice of just doing it, without distracting concern for proper technique or results, some Medieval Christians would speak of the "Magister Internus," the master within who provides insight as to continuous refinement of one's method – if we would just listen. But, again, the most important piece of advice is to remain alert to the fact that the best method is humble service to the other. Turns out "love thy neighbor as thyself" is not commandment so much as our best advice, and struggle for justice is not sacrifice but fulfillment.

## References

- Barrett, W. (1978). *The illusion of technique*. New York: Doubleday.
- Havel, V. (1989). *Living in truth*. Ed. Jan Vladislav. London: Faber and Faber.
- Hershock, P. D. (2001). *Reinventing the wheel: A Buddhist response to the information age*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Jaspers, K. (1957). *Man in the modern age*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Johnson, E.A. (1993). *She who is: The mystery of god in feminist theological discourse*. New York: Crossroad.
- Orlowski, J. (2020). *The social dilemma* (film).
- Plato. *Apology*, 38a.
- Plato. *Phaedo*, 114d.
- Rowe, S. C. (2021, second edition), *Overcoming America / America overcoming: Choosing culture and being at home in the world*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1993). *Embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Williams, D. R. (1987). *Wilderness lost: The religious origins of the American mind*. London: Associated University Presses.

Zajonc, A. (2013). Contemplative pedagogy: A quiet revolution in higher education. In *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 134, 83-94.