

CREATION'S WISDOM

Spiritual Practice and Climate Change



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Preface



One of my earliest spiritual experiences occurred at age eleven. I was sitting in my seventh grade science class, and the teacher was explaining the structure of a cell. I can still remember the feeling, watching the drawing on the board and experiencing my mind explode. It sounds strange, I know. Yet at that moment it seemed that a great mystery was being revealed, and I knew I wanted to explore this mystery, this amazing thing at the center of most living beings. Over the next few years, I would have several such numinous encounters: when I was in the woods, when I learned about meditation, when I was alone at night.

These mystical events led me through the world of science and are what ultimately led me to embrace my vocation as a student of the spiritual life, a vocation I have pursued for over four decades.

This book has its roots in those early experiences and is the culmination of my life of contemplation and action. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to bring together many of the teachings that have been given to me and that I've been able to put into practice in spiritual communities, churches, and the healings arts.

I also find myself somewhat stunned that this book was written and produced during the COVID-19 global pandemic. That I made the decision to try and write a book about spirituality and climate change a mere six months before this worldwide

catastrophe began feels like the sort of providential act that, as I often joke with friends, “almost makes you want to believe in God.” If the rise of the coronavirus, as yet another catastrophe in a long list of recent climate-related catastrophes, is not enough to convince us that we need to relate to ourselves and our world differently, it is hard to imagine what will get that message through our collective consciousness. For the spiritual life is, at its heart, about learning from our experience as well as from books or traditions. And while Jesus is my primary teacher, over the years I’ve had hundreds of wonderful teachers and traveling companions. I endeavor to learn from each person I encounter and have often found wisdom in the most unlikely places, an experience had by many who are open to the whisper of God amid the chaos of the world.

I am grateful for the life journey I’ve been given, and I dedicate this work to all who seek, who journey, and who are on the Way.

Introduction



The purpose of spirituality—a term referring to the study and practice of our relationship with all that lies beyond the bounds of our individual self—is to help people make sense of the world and find their way through the difficulties of life. This has been true in every society and in every era. Faced with pain, suffering, death, confusion, joy, love, and care, people struggle to find meaning, solace, comfort, and assurance in a universe that often appears arbitrary and terrifying. The teachings and practices of the spiritual life have sought to provide this comfort and to help human beings find a path to peace and meaning. Whether the result of this journey is described as wisdom, enlightenment, salvation, happiness, being accepted by God, or being at one with the universe, we yearn to know that, as the gospel song says, “everything’s gonna be alright this morning.”

Furthermore, spirituality has always adapted and been transformed to fit the language, the culture, the era, and the particular challenges of the time and place in which it arises. In the ancient desert of Palestine, people poured oil on piles of stones to mark sacred places; in the Himalayas, people envisioned cosmic deities living in the clouds; in eighteenth-century European universities, people wrote confessions and catechisms; and these unique expressions spoke to the people of that age.

Today we are facing a new set of problems and challenges. We live in a globalized society, interconnected via information networks unimaginable only a few decades ago. With billions of

people consuming resources at ever-increasing rates, it appears that our planet is nearing full capacity. What humans call wilderness disappeared long ago, and now we manage, or attempt to manage, every acre of the planet we call Earth. The globalization of industry, commerce, travel, and information has had a massive impact on the environment, at a scale we still struggle to accept. Global climate change is upon us with a transformative power that threatens to outstrip both our ability to understand what is happening and our ability to respond to the changes we are experiencing. These changes threaten to uproot millions of people from their homes, render large swaths of the planet uninhabitable, and perhaps even end human life on earth as it is currently constituted.

This environmental crisis has hatched, or coincides with, various crises related to our health as well as our spirituality. Throughout the world, but particularly in the First World, levels of mental illness are rising dramatically, as are the levels of chronic, lifestyle-related, physical illnesses. In 2020, the world was being gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Anxiety, depression, and chronic pain have become staples of the population in the United States, affecting over a third of the population. In particular, anxiety about climate change and the effects it will have on our future is becoming endemic, especially among people under forty.

At the same time, especially within this younger demographic, involvement in traditional Christianity has plummeted. This form of Christianity, largely based on an extinct metaphysics, the three-story universe of heaven, earth, and hell, and wrapped in a style of worship, community practice, and intellectual assent to creeds that make little sense to the modern person, does not speak to the fears, longings, and understandings of our twenty-first-century population. When the

earth is burning, worrying about the activity of invisible deities on thrones often feels unhelpful, let alone real. Meanwhile, as traditional religious practice has waned, interest in spiritual practices—a wide variety of meditation and prayer practices that engage us experientially and lend themselves to communal interactions that are relational and loving—has increased dramatically. People are seeking a spirituality for our time.

The purpose of this book is to address that need: What would a Christian spirituality that resonates with people in an era of climate change be like? What are the practices that can help lead and guide us? What would a helpful perspective be? As we alluded to earlier, spiritualities have drawn from their environment—their time and place—to speak most clearly to their intended audience, their tribe. For people in the mountains, it would have made no sense to talk of a flat desert. For people who were discovering the logic of the Enlightenment and were enamored of words and concepts, pouring oil on rocks would have seemed absurd. For people living in a time of climate crisis, we need our focus and the attention of our faith to be on the basic elements of creation. If creation is in crisis, then our spirituality must directly engage this creation and articulate a spiritual framework that will allow us to relate to both the world and the crisis we face in a life-giving and healthy way.

In this work we will use the tools of Christian Scripture and theology seen through the lens of modern science and also engage a set of teachings that haven't been applied to the issue of modern Christian faith, the Five Wisdom, or Five Element, teachings that arise from Chinese Five Element theory and Tibetan Five Wisdom practice. Because this latter resource has never, to my knowledge, been used in Christian theological reflection, let me explain briefly my rationale for using it here. It will also be explained in more detail in the work that follows.

Throughout Christian history, communities of faith and individuals have incorporated new or different teachings to help people see Christianity from a fresh and even deeper perspective. While some decry such activity as “syncretism” and use this term negatively, the truth is that our faith would not exist as we know it without such incorporation and integration. From minor adornments such as a Christmas tree to major philosophical insights from the Greeks, from new instruments such as the organ to the arrangement of the church calendar or the art of the Celtic knot, virtually everything that forms our religious environment has, at some point, come from somewhere else. This is not a bad thing; rather, this is how God works with us, deepens our understanding, and widens our perspective.

The biblical witness contains numerous references to God acting in the created world: the Spirit blows over the waters; the earth quakes at God’s command. Wisdom is beside God creating the world and delighting in both the creation and the wisdom that creates, and the power of God is manifest in the created order. However, despite this obvious intertwining of creation and the Divine, the Christian relationship between the human being and the universe has become alienated and distorted by the idea that humans are separate from and meant to dominate “nature.”

Our relationship with the natural world and our faith has also suffered from the denigration of “natural theology,” that is, any theological system that relies on nature for any of its observations and conclusions. This dislike of natural theology has arisen, particularly in Protestant circles, from the emphasis on *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). This phrase implies that it is only through Scripture, the Bible, that we can know anything about God and that any conclusions drawn from nature must be inherently misleading at best or nature-worshiping paganism

at worst. This rejection of natural theology is misguided and even antiscritptural. There are myriad stories in the Bible where people come to understand, hear, know God through nature. As we will discuss throughout this book, the wisdom tradition of the Bible is intimately bound up with the natural world and our experience of it. Furthermore, people throughout history have always seen and experienced God through God's natural world. Of course, the Bible is the central piece of written teaching that grounds and creates the Christian faith and religion. However, that doesn't mean that we do not also learn about God from the natural world; we clearly do, and the Bible promotes this learning and relationship.

Many have talked about and discussed the problem of Christian alienation from nature; and when one perspective or one set of theological habits causes us to be stuck, blocked from growth and unable to move forward in a healthy way, it is valuable to introduce another view, a different perspective. This helps us to shift and see our difficulties and challenges from a new angle, in a new light; and thus inspired and refreshed, we can continue along our path to growth and life. Bringing these ancient teachings on elemental reality into contact with Christianity, especially as they are extremely congruent with our Christian theology, will add such a new vantage point and allow us to move forward in a manner that is constructive and liberating.

The book is loosely divided into three parts: an analysis of our current condition and the new perspective that is arising; a description and discussion of the Five Wisdom teachings and practices and how this informs a spirituality for our time; and, finally, a section on how these new teachings engage our current crises and can transform our lives, our view, our practice, and our individual and collective response to a world amid climate change. Throughout, particularly in the second and third parts

of the book, we will focus on spiritual practice. We are not merely interested in intellectual reflection, helpful as that can be, but rather in how we can practice our faith, do the work of contemplation, and dwell in the deep stillness of our being, where we find our connection to the source of life.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine the nature of our current environmental crisis and its intersection with the multiple other challenges we currently face. This awareness of intersectionality—understanding that all challenges and crises are linked and bound up in one another—must become clearer in our collective consciousness. Just as the stuff of the universe is interrelated and interchangeable, so too is the stuff of human life: one challenge cannot be isolated from another.

Chapter 1 describes how the crisis of climate change has rapidly broken upon us over the past three decades. Going from an emerging situation that few recognized in its early stages to a worldwide transformational force, global warming has arrived as the central issue of our time. Yet it is not the only global phenomenon that plagues humanity. Issues of chronic health problems, addiction, human displacement, and other environmental challenges resulting from our consumerist lifestyle threaten to overwhelm us.

The second chapter examines how these issues share a spiritual root: our alienation from the rest of “nature.” Although human beings are inseparable from the rest of creation, the Christian approach to our relationship with the rest of the natural world has far too often understood humanity as a separate and superior entity that can do with nature what it wills without consequence. Additionally, our lack of training in the awareness and management of change and transformation, and our deep attachments to “the way things are,” has left us with an unconscious assumption that the material world is immutable

and immune to the forces of chaos, death, and resurrection. Essentially, we assume that the sun will rise and set every day, that spring will follow winter, and that the worship schedule at our local church will never change.

This disconnection from the way things are—a form of delusional thinking—has led to a series of collective actions that then manifest our errors of perception and relationship via the crises we are experiencing. Yet, despite these errors, ecological systems are self-correcting and often contain the cure for what ails them; and at this exact juncture where we are being threatened by our alienated states, a great yearning for spiritual practice and deep reconnection has arisen within human society.

The third chapter explores the nature of this spiritual awakening and, in particular, how it has evolved to focus on embodied spiritualities that reveal our desire to cure our traumas, our embodied disconnections, and reroot us in our relationship with creation. These movements, many of which highlight the indigenous roots of the spiritual life, can be of great help as we seek a spirituality for our time. This chapter, which makes the explicit case for the need of an elemental spirituality, will lead directly to the descriptions of the Five Elements.

Chapters 4 through 9 describe the Five Element/Wisdom perspective, how it applies to and integrates with the Christian faith, and also how it brings us closer to the natural world and provides a framework for seeing wisdom no matter what the future brings. Each chapter also contains a practice component in keeping with this contemplative approach.

Arising from the ancient Chinese Five Element theory, the Five Wisdom teachings begin with a perspective confirmed by modern science, namely, that everything in the universe is interrelated and interdependent. Furthermore, it understands, like the Hebrew biblical tradition, that wisdom is present in

creation at all levels of existence and that our job, as humans, is to listen for this wisdom and “walk in the way of insight” (Proverbs 9:6).

Christian theology has described the human condition as being fundamentally confused in our relationship to the Divine—a condition commonly known as original sin—and has also affirmed the central role of creation in God’s actions in this universe. However, much like the elusive search for a unified field theory in physics, Christianity has struggled to find an elegant and life-giving integration of its descriptions of the human being, creation, the divine life, and salvation, the overcoming of confusion. The Five Wisdom teaching can aid us in achieving this deep integration and thus allow us to practice immersing ourselves in both our relationship with God and the creation such that we can find paths to health and wholeness.

The Five Wisdom teaching sees the five elements—space, water, earth, fire, and air—not just as physical elements but as holistic expressions of psychological and spiritual realities, what Christians understand as the attributes of God. Thus, each element contains an inherent wisdom that manifests both internally within each organism and also externally in creation: in seasons, landscapes, and cultures. This wisdom, or spiritual energy, is available to everyone and unites everyone as it flows, much like the divine breath, through time and space.

Human beings, as creatures with the capacity for individual awareness—one of the distinctive signs of the divine image we are said to possess—have the ability to relate to these elemental energies from either a wisdom or a neurotic perspective. When we let go of our ego self and allow wisdom to arise naturally, we experience the qualities of wisdom, or the presence of God; but when we are in relationship with an element from our ego perspective, we experience the neurotic manifestation of that element.

The five chapters dealing with each individual element detail the wisdom and neurotic aspect of each energy and also describe how we shift from the neurotic experience of separateness and control to the wisdom experience of healing and integration. Beginning with the wisdom of *space*, we will explore the nature of the loving container God has given us, a reality that can support and hold the vast array of biological systems that we call life on earth. Next we will see how the wisdom of *water* provides for us the clarity we need to see what is happening to us and to reality and then make wise decisions as we move forward in our individual and collective lives. The wisdom of *air* guides these compassionate actions, for air is the element of movement and accomplishing things in the world. Next, the wisdom of *earth* shows us that we can be grounded in abundance; God is always providing enough, and thus we can choose actions that create an environment of sharing, hospitality, and bounty without exploitation of people or resources. Finally, the wisdom of *fire* binds us together in loving relationship and gives us the capacity to experience love in all its dimensions as we relate to ourselves, each other, and God.

Following this detailed discussion and description of the elemental approach, the final four chapters engage in a series of reflections on the practical ramifications of an elemental faith. Central to each of these discussions is the previously noted deep realization that life is elemental and intertwined. In considering the environment, people, animals, plants, and society, we realize they are made of the same “stuff” as we are. Furthermore, this stuff has been in dynamic relationship with itself, changing places from one creature and object to another. Seeing and embodying these truths, we can no longer abide any theological, philosophical, or sociopolitical system that treats the “other” as different from ourselves. It is this deep awareness

of connection that guides us to a new way of being in a time of climate change.

Building on this central insight, these chapters will assist readers in examining their own elemental histories, both in terms of what is our dominant energy or element and also in terms of our deeper history with wisdom and neurosis: How have we internalized an alienated approach to creation through our religion, our culture, and our interaction with a variety of oppressive systems? What in our history has kept alive a tradition of wisdom? How we can connect profoundly with this wisdom, one that brings us more fully into alignment with God's work in the world and creates a relationship to our current condition that fosters healing?

The final two chapters address the issue of despair: how can we face the existential crisis that is upon us? An elemental faith is one that understands and lives in the reality of impermanence and transformation. Our spiritual lives and practices can help us live in the reality of change, let go of fear, and cease grasping for permanence. Our Christian faith tells us that God is in all things and that our relationship with the divine person of Jesus grounds us in the experience of eternity. Unfortunately, while many claim to "believe" these statements, our lives rarely reflect this belief; and it is hard to see concrete manifestations of a fearless connection to God in day-to-day existence. Hopefully, as we see and practice the dance of elemental wisdom, we can experience directly our connection to the vast spiritual reality that is God and learn to be in creation while knowing a boundless love that sustains us, no matter what comes next.

As we embark on this elemental journey, note that this work draws from various sources and disciplines as well as my entire life of experience, study, and contemplative practice. One option for such a work is an academic approach with a huge set

of footnotes, a myriad of cited sources, and a large dose of quotes from others. Such a style is extremely valuable and also, frankly, inaccessible to the majority of people. Rather, I have chosen to adopt a more readable approach that is accessible to a wide audience. References have been provided in the footnotes for further investigation, and, of course, we have the internet, where information about anything is available with a few keystrokes.

Furthermore, I have chosen not to address the issue of the “truth” of the variety of teachings presented here. I realize that there are people who do not think God exists or do not believe in the tenets of the Christian faith, just as there are those who do not believe in the precepts of Chinese medicine or Buddhism. I have no quarrel with anyone who dismisses these disciplines. My own epistemological stance to spiritual teachings is not one of “blind” belief but rather the skeptical approach of a scientist: the value of a theory or set of teachings is not whether they are objectively “true,” as every theory falls short in this regard, but whether it helps us to navigate the world. When the response is yes, then the theory is worthwhile; when the answer becomes no, or a better theory comes along, then the theory is no longer “true” or worth keeping. Therefore, having engaged and studied the teachings outlined in the following pages for my entire adult life, I find them to be “true” because I find them to be helpful and healing as we pursue peace, justice, and a world with less suffering.