

“Everything was beautiful. At the end of the street, a street I had walked down more times than I could count, I saw the other side for the first time, glowing white. I understood it.”

– MIEKO KAWAKAMI, *Heaven*

To See The World Whole

Michael Sacasas

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My text for this evening is a passage from the gospel according to Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book II, Chapter 2. These are the words spoken by the wizard Gandalf the Grey in his confrontation with another wizard Saruman, who is described elsewhere as having a “mind of metal and wheels.”

To Saruman, Gandalf says: “He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.”

So let me start with my title: “To See The World Whole.”

When I first started thinking about this talk and what topic I might try to address, my mind turned to debates currently raging about the purpose and function of higher education, debates that have become not only politicized—because, of course, how a people is educated has always been, at least in part, a political matter—but which have become active fronts in the digitized culture wars.

What follows will not be anything like a thorough or substantive engagement with those debates, but my thinking did bring me back to a theme that I have thought about on and off for a long time: how do we learn to see, actually see, the world?

We are always looking but rarely seeing, and much less are we seeing the world whole. And by “seeing the world whole” I mean something like experiencing a vision of reality, a vision that, of course, includes sight but also involves the mind, the imagination, the heart. How do we achieve such a vision that encompasses the fullness of reality in its depth and in its multiple dimensions: intellectual, sensual, moral, spiritual, etc.?

But the word whole also suggests something more than completeness or totality. It also suggests health and all of what the Hebrew word *shalom* encompasses: peace, well-being, even blessedness.

So asking how we might see the world whole can lead us to consider not only matters of knowledge and perception, but also how we might achieve wholeness of being for ourselves and also for our communities. How can we see the world whole? How can we see to it that the world finds wholeness,

peace, *shalom*? And, more to the point of what I would like to explore tonight: is there a relationship between the two? Might it be that learning to see the world whole might also help us find and promote its wholeness?

I think so. And that's what I'd like to consider together with you during the next few minutes.

But first, it might be a good thing to say a little bit about the problem, right? What is the problem that I'm presuming when I talk about seeing the world whole?

So I presume that when I say that we should seek to see the world whole, there is little need to expound on the nature or the urgency of the brokenness of the world. We are all keenly aware, if not intimately acquainted, with this brokenness, the immense cruelty and violence that humans inflict upon one another, either through personal actions or complicity with and participation in social structures characterized by injustice and inhumanity. Evidence quite often graphic of such cruelty and violence is always only for all of us a click away.

And likewise, we can plainly see the rancor and hostility that runs through our political culture, inflaming passions and driving even friends and family members apart. We can see,

too, the evident degradations of God's creation and their accumulating costs.

And finally, we have a growing body of evidence indicating quite clearly that we are not well. Depression, loneliness, isolation, and suicide are all on the rise in claiming larger swaths of the younger generations than ever before. Shalom, peace, wholeness does not characterize our experience.

And while this may seem like a less significant claim alongside that litany of brokenness that I just referenced, neither are we predisposed to see the world whole, to experience the integrity of the world and our place in it. And this too comes at a cost to our well-being and to our wholeness.

In short, we are alienated from one another, from the world, and even from ourselves. And to put this another way, I would argue that the most powerful forces shaping our social world are disintegrating forces, centrifugal forces—that is, forces that tear apart and fragment. In fact, I'd be hard-pressed to think of a countervailing force that leads us towards harmony or unity or integrity.

So take this commonplace, altogether banal scene, which will be familiar to you, I think, as it is to me, as a symbol for the larger forces at play here.

You see me walking, maybe on a sidewalk, maybe on a trail, maybe down the supermarket aisle. And you see that my gaze is absorbed by the screen of my smartphone in my hand.

So where am I in that moment? My body is there, of course, on the sidewalk, the trail, the supermarket aisle. But my mind is not there. It could be in countless other places. I am divided. I cannot in such moments, and they are frequent, see the world whole because my attention, which is just another way of talking about my capacity to take in the world, is torn asunder. The world recedes, my senses lose their grip on the reality around me, and if I am flitting from one thing to another, my mind itself splinters.

While this is a mundane experience, I think it's consequential and significant—consequential because the effect is real and damaging. Ask yourself how you feel in such moments or in the immediate aftermath when you come back to the world before you. Do you feel focused, alert, well-oriented? Or do you feel a bit lost, scatterbrained, disoriented, possibly even a little lightheaded and dizzy?

What is the compound effect of our habitual turn to the screen cognitively, socially, physically? What mental tax is being extorted from us throughout the day, partially unnoticed because we are paying it in such seemingly small installments?

But now let us zoom out a little bit. That's an example, I think, of how something that is very mundane and commonplace leads to the sense of fracturing and disintegration. But if we zoom out, if we consider the history of the modern world, we will encounter powerful forces at work separating realities that were once whole.

In listing these, I'm not meaning to pass judgment on the relative merits of these developments. I mean only to consider the numerous ways our experience of the world, physical and social, has been partitioned in ways that would have been unintelligible to earlier civilizations and cultures. Where there was once an organic whole, a woven fabric, we encounter fragments and threads.

The story of modernity is a story of disintegration. Across a number of fields, the modern world learned to take things apart. Some of this was done in the interest of an ostensibly better understanding of the natural world. Some of it was

driven by the desire for greater degrees of technical precision and economic efficiency.

In other cases, the separations were philosophical in nature or they reflected changing social realities. Intellectually, specialization was the order of the day. If you live in academia, you know this firsthand. Nature was dissected. Church and state went their separate ways. Science and philosophy parted, as did faith and reason. Work was detached from the home and family life.

Fact and value, human and non-human, individual and community, body and mind, object and subject, these all became binaries. What was once whole was now separate.

Now of course, such differentiations were never total or complete. Anthropologist Bruno Latour, who passed away recently, famously argued that we have never been modern precisely because we never really achieved these strict separations—he calls them purifications—we imagine to be the defining features of the modern world. Religion and politics, science and belief, nature and culture have always blended and intermingled—sometimes, Latour argued, creating monstrous hybrids.

Nonetheless, to be modern was to believe that such separations were necessary and good, and while never complete, some ruptures were real and consequential.

In a 1974 essay ominously titled *The Coming Trauma of Materialism*, one of the more interesting thinkers of the 20th century and a lesser known member of the Inklings, Owen Barfield, made the following observation, and he's alluding in this observation to the work of the American historian and novelist Theodore Roszak:

For Roszak, the alienation of which we hear so much nowadays is merely a synonym, an emotive synonym but still a synonym, for the very principle of objectivity on which all science is and has been based since the scientific revolution.

In Barfield's view, the ideal of objectivity to achieve detached knowledge—knowledge that is neutral, a view from nowhere, that became the modern gold standard for the pursuit of knowledge—yielded all the various forms of alienation and the attendant human cost that followed.

The vaunted progress of “knowledge”...has been progress in alienation. The alienation of nature from humanity, which the exclusive pursuit of objectivity in science

entails, was the first stage; and was followed, with the acceptance of man himself as part of a nature so alienated, by the alienation of man of himself.

So the reason we need a reading group on Theology and the Environment, and helping us to think, as Natalie explained, about faith and the world together, is that the habit of thought that the modernity engendered in us taught us to separate these things and compartmentalize them—not to see the world whole, but to see it in pieces.

Barfield goes on and he says:

This final and fatal step in reductionism occurred in two stages. First his body, and then his mind.

What Barfield is describing here is first an alienation of the human from nature, and then insofar as we just assume that the human is another part of nature, an alienation of the human from itself in two stages: first the body, then the mind.

Newton's approach to nature was already, by contrast with older scientific traditions, a form of behaviorism; and what has since followed has been its extension from astronomy and physics into physiology and ultimately psychology.

In this view, Barfield is echoing, although maybe he informed the view of his better known friend, C.S. Lewis, who in *The Abolition of Man*, a book that becomes more timely every year, made the following argument:

Human nature will be the last part of nature to surrender to man. The battle will then be won. We shall have 'taken the thread of life out of the hand of Clotho'.

Clotho is one of the three fates that spun the thread that was the life of every person, the destiny of every person.

And be henceforth free to make our species whatever we wish it to be. The battle will indeed be won, but who precisely will have won it? For the power of man to make himself what he pleases means, as we have seen, the power of some men to make other men what they please.

Or as he also put it:

What we call man's power over nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with nature as its instrument.

My concern here is not with the dynamics of power, important as such a critical consideration might be. My concern is with Barfield's interest in the experience of

alienation, what it feels like to not be whole in our relationship to the world and to ourselves.

But perhaps Barfield's language and the concerns, as well as Lewis's, may seem a bit dated, characterized as they are by the ponderous generalities that were so common among the writers and intellectuals of the mid-20th century, who without blushing could speak of capital M Man and capital N Nature and capital S Science and objectivity.

You would be justified in wondering if I'd ever heard of this thing they call postmodernity. Isn't our problem now that we do not believe in objectivity? Either in science or in journalism or in academic research, isn't the naive enlightenment view of disinterested rationality now thoroughly discredited?

So my answer would be something like, it's complicated. But here is what I would venture to say for the purposes of our discussion tonight.

While we may have lost confidence—and everywhere the “we” is very generic, right—but while we may have lost confidence in human reason and in human objectivity, we have not abandoned the ideals altogether. We have simply transferred

these hopes we pinned on objective reason to the power of our machines.

Sufficient data and algorithmic processes and yes, artificial intelligence, which just a couple of days ago we called machine learning, now promise the kind of disinterested and objective knowledge that we no longer believe human beings can reliably achieve. So by and large, we have in fact doubled down on the modern ideals.

Listen carefully, for example, to how data analytic tools are marketed. Sentencing and paroling algorithms, for example, are touted for their ability to eliminate human bias from the judicial system. They don't.

Fitness and health trackers promise to give us a true assessment of our physical well-being. No.

Dating apps claim to know us and our potential partners better than either of us know ourselves. I'll let you decide.

Certain applications of facial recognition software in an unfortunate revival of 19th century phrenology offer to judge potential employees' character or trustworthiness. They cannot.

But we hope that they can.

In each case, the ideals of objectivity, distance and disinterestedness, and abstraction still tend to dominate the most consequential institutions devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. And perhaps more importantly, the point of knowledge is still power—to achieve the power to better predict, order, exploit, control, manipulate, and master the world and our experience in it.

Another mid-20th century thinker Romano Guardini put it this way in his little book *The End of the Modern World*, written in 1956:

Technological man experiences nature neither as a standard of value nor as a living shelter for his spirit. The technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts...as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as mere “space” into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.

And more recently, and directly related to the theme tonight, the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, some of you have heard me quote many times before, has argued in a short and brilliant book called *The Uncontrollability of the World*, that this is still very much the dominant spirit of our age, even if our

ambitions are not, for the most part, quite so grandiose; more importantly, that this posture that seeks control, this posture towards the world, one that seeks above all else control of our experience of the world, has the paradoxically tragic effect of rendering the world mute, dead, and unresponsive.

“The scientifically, technologically, economically, and politically controllable world,” Rosa argues, “mysteriously seems to elude us or to close itself off from us. It withdraws from us, becoming mute and unreadable. Even more, it proves to be threatened and threatening in equal measure.”

The relation of the world that emerges from a desire for control is characterized by alienation or worldlessness. It is, Rosa writes, “a relation of relationlessness in which subject and world find themselves inwardly unconnected from, indifferent toward, and even hostile to each other.”

Early on in the book, Rosa put the matter about as starkly as you can:

A world that is fully known in which everything has been planned and mastered would be a dead world.

And a dead world offers us no consolation, no meaning, no purpose.

So let me sum up the problem before I conclude with a few suggestions about what we might do about all of this. Our default way of knowing the world and ourselves—by default I mean, this is the posture that we are going to assume simply by being and growing up in the world that we do—this default posture has presumed first that distance, objectivity, and abstraction are the path to knowledge.

Second, that the point of knowledge is to achieve power, control, or mastery over the world and our experience. This stance has produced undeniable achievements. We don't put a man on the moon without this way of looking at the world. Neither do we cure certain diseases. It has also served to impoverish and fracture our experience and to strip meaning from knowledge. This form of knowledge is impersonal, instrumental, and ordered toward exploitation as C.S. Lewis saw so clearly over 70 years ago.

So what then can we do? What can be done in the context of institutions of learning and moral formation such as this one and the one across the street? What can we do to expand our understanding of what it is to know so that we might recover a way of seeing the world whole and, as a consequence, find wholeness? In other words, how might we arrest the forces of

disintegration and discover the conditions for integration and wholeness?

So I'm going to humbly just submit four things for your consideration. I'll offer you a principle, a stance, a practice, and a truth.

First a principle: Seek human scale encounters with the world.

Needless to say, there is much to be learned and certainly power to be gained by abandoning the human scale encounter with the world. The telescope and the microscope help us do as much; the ideal of the Archimedean point from which we can lift the whole world if we just find the right point of fulcrum. The power and speed of modern computing, the sheer volume and intensity of what modern media make available to us, all of it encourages us to encounter the world at a more than human scale.

Wendell Berry once warned 20 years ago, 23 years ago, that the next great division of the world will be between people who wish to live as creatures and people who wish to live as machines.

This includes, I think, striving to know the world as machines rather than as creatures. Where possible, we should strive for encounters with the world that reflect the created fittingness of the human body to the world, encounters in which our senses are not amputated by the very instruments we use to ostensibly empower them.

Second, a stance. Against the stance of objectivity and abstraction and instrumentality, maybe we should strive for a stance of contemplation.

Contemplation, which maybe just sounds like a rather mystical word, is a way of taking the world in whole; of receiving it, and I think this is the key, of receiving it rather than of always trying to act in it. Encountering reality too rather than its simulations.

To contemplate is to wait. To contemplate is to behold. To wait patiently on the real to disclose itself to us. To try to see what is really there, and not what we think is there, or what we want to be there, or what we want to make be there.

Third, a practice. Closely related to the stance of contemplation, perhaps an essential condition of contemplation, is the practice of silence.

And here, I'm just going to share some insights from the Swiss philosopher Max Picard. I live in the mid-20th century intellectually, obviously, as you can tell.

“There is more help and healing in silence,” Max Picard wrote, “than in all the ‘useful things’. Purposeless, unexplainable silence suddenly appears at the side of the all-too-powerful and frightens us by its very purposelessness.”

We're uneasy in silence. I didn't include it here, but elsewhere in the book, Picard writes, we don't put silence to the test, silence puts us to the test.

It interferes with the regular flow of the purposeful, the instrumental, the exploitative. It strengthens the untouchable. It lessens the damage inflicted by exploitation. It makes things whole again by taking them back from the world of dissipation into the world of wholeness.

A little later on he writes this. He says:

A man who still has the substance of silence within himself does not need to be always watching the movements of his inmost being, does not need consciously to order everything since much is ordered

without his conscious knowledge by the power of the substance of silence which can modify the contradictions at war within him...

Life is then not torn apart into the polarities of faith and knowledge, truth and beauty, life and spirit; the whole of reality appears before us and not merely the conceptual polarities.

All of this in silence.

Human life is not determined by the incompatible choices of either or, but by the mediation of these polarities...Man is better able to endure things hostile to his own nature, things that use him up if he has the silent substance within...

Technics in itself, life with machines. is not injurious unless the protective substance of silence is absent.

I think of these as claims that could only be attested to through experience. Picard can write eloquently about them. I can tell you about them. But until you experience them, you don't quite see the truth of it fully.

So try silence. That's a practice.

Fourth, a truth.

If love is the ordering principle of the cosmos, which I think is a theological claim a Christian can make, if love is the ordering principle of the cosmos, then our truthful apprehension of the cosmos must likewise involve love.

But love is the very thing that we have excluded in our desire to know the world at a distance, objectively, abstractly. Knowledge arising from such objectivity can only be partial and fragmentary, failing to take the world in whole or to see the unity in the midst of the parts because the unifying principle, love, was excluded at the outset.

And this is just another way of saying that the beauty of the real, the wonder and the admiration the real elicits from those who in contemplative silence seek to see the world whole, is a legitimate and noble path to knowledge and to wisdom.

And all of us who are involved in the work of learning and teaching should seek to walk this path at least as much as we walk the path of objectivity and abstraction.

My wager is that we will find more than knowledge—or better, we will find a fuller form of knowledge, which will satisfy our deep, unanswered, and often unacknowledged

desire to not only know the true, the good, and the beautiful, but to enter into it, to participate in these transcendentals, which finally is just a way of saying to share in the life of the triune God.

Thank you all very much. Glad you're here.

Thank you.