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thinking on the edge

L O R R A I N E F I L I P E K

Science & Religion



We are in a race
for our lives. Will
we destroy
ourselves and our
world, or will we
transcend to a more
mature stage of
consciousness?
The choice is ours
to make.

The Reverend Ward A. Knights, Jr, on reading certain *IONS* articles, was moved to comment in a letter to the editor (*IONS* #63) on his dismay that “people [who write for *IONS*] . . . seem to need to bring down religion to make their point.” He writes, “I want to yell back, ‘No! Religion as I know it is not an empty shell! No! Religion as I know it is a very private matter! . . . No! Religion as I know it is not simply about dogma!’ ” He ends with the plea that we “look for the similarities in our interests and practices. . . . Yes, let’s join together. *We are not the enemy.*” (italics added)

I have been a scientist most of my life. Like Reverend Knights, I, too, have had similar frustrating experiences when reading articles in *IONS* and similar journals and

books supposedly dedicated to helping raise consciousness. However, in my case the issue was the supposed shallowness of science and the inability to grow to “enlightenment” through science. I wanted to scream out, “No! Science as I know it is not reductionist! Nonlinear dynamics and emergence concepts led me to the inner path and spirit! No! *We are not the enemy!*”

Are Reverend Knights and I merely too sensitive, or is there something more going on—or both? I decided to reread the article by Ervin Laszlo (“The Quiet Dawn” in *IONS* #59) to which Reverend Knights was referring in his letter. When I had first read the article, as someone who had given my life to the profession of science, I had agreed with it wholeheartedly because it fit my experience. Perhaps Reverend Knights was being too sensitive, since the whole purpose of Laszlo’s article was to make us aware of the positive changes in values and consciousness that are “occur[ing] in all segments of society.” But when I tried to read the article from the perspective of people who had given their life to the religious profession, I was surprised at what I found. I had the same reaction as Reverend Knights!

From that perspective, it seemed to me that Laszlo had instinctively written the article for those who had taken a similar path to his—those who had followed science, and who had long ago given up on religion as ineffectual. As a scientist, he defended science because he had seen how nonscientists have failed to perceive how the cutting edge of science has evolved toward “a holistic way of thinking about the world.” Yet he made the same mistake as the

nonscientists in reverse: He failed to acknowledge how the cutting edge of religion (and all other disciplines) had also *similarly* evolved. He actually implied that it had not happened by stating that “a reconciliation between inner-directed spirituality and organized religion is not impossible” rather than noting that it has, in fact, *already occurred* in the cutting edge of many religions. Laszlo *separated* the great religious thinkers, such as Thomas Berry, from “religion,” even as he *included* the cutting edge of science as “science.”

In his choice of words, Laszlo had succumbed to an old habit—a subtle dualistic pattern of thought. And the science/religion dualism is one of the most deeply ingrained patterns of all. We (Boomers and older) were born into a time when the dualistic pattern was everywhere. It was ingrained into us from birth, and it bred in us a sense of insecurity—we look for validation through the praise of those in authority. And we’re not good enough unless we’re better than someone else. We have to prove our worth by proving the other wrong. Our dualistic upbringing helped shape each of us to act and think *automatically* in certain dualistic patterns. Thus, certain situations will trigger automatic responses from us before we ever have time to think. And it requires a consciously developed *mindfulness* to overcome our ingrained patterns.

Dualistic thinking is a very difficult pattern to overcome unless we are *constantly* mindful of it—even (or especially) when we are writing about it! To take Laszlo off the hook, I’d like to use myself as the example for the rest of this discussion. I’d like to tell a story to try to explain how we got into this mess, and what we can do to get out of it.

Once upon a time (in the early- to mid-20th century), I and many others were born both into a religion and into a belief that science and technology were progress. As was the paradigm of the times, when we were of an age to choose a career path, we had to choose one side of the science/religion duality. The choice was often triggered by a strongly emotional event. I was a fervent Catholic when I was young. When I learned about the negative aspects of the Catholic Church and its history—the Spanish Inquisition, the witch trials, the pain of watching families struggle and children starve because birth control is not allowed—I abandoned religion, and turned to science to save the world. I tried to ignore the crueler aspects of science—the atomic bomb,

mutilations and painful testing on animals, technological “accidents” such as Bhopal—that turned many others against science as the major *evil* in the world.

Either choice—science or religion—had a grain of truth. But each had something missing. As I and others embarked on our careers and life paths, we entered the first stage of mourning for our loss—numbness and emotional denial. We lived without thought or feeling for that half of us that we had given up (or else we compartmentalized the two halves so that they wouldn’t interfere with each other).

Eventually, as we lived with our choice, many of us became uncomfortable with it. We entered the second stage of mourning—emotional awareness. This stage brought with it anxiety, anger, protest, guilt, a very upset gut. . . . *Because* it lacked something, either choice brought with it a strong desire to convince others—and especially ourselves—that ours was the right choice. Some highly respected scientists have tried to do so by using reductionist logic to show that religious or spiritual impulses are just the products of endorphins and other chemicals in our brains. Some highly respected religious philosophers have countered that *only* prayer and contemplation will save us because science, including the trend toward holistic thinking, is trying to *replace* spirit with the material world. I swung from one extreme to the other, as does a pendulum, in my search for balance. I tried out the stories of each group. Both sounded *almost* right, but neither quite fit; both constricted my gut.

When my gut hurt so much that I no longer wanted to get up in the morning, I reached a “bifurcation point,” as Dr Raima Larter called it in her article “Life Lessons from a New Science” (*IONS* #59, the same issue as Laszlo’s article). I left my lucrative partnership in an environmental-science consulting firm. I went back to school to learn to design architecture that heals the spirit. I read and read and read . . . and I gardened and walked and dreamed and “rescued” a feral kitten (or should I be honest and say she rescued me with her need and her love?). I learned through the pain that it is only when I recognized the truths and limitations of *both* sides that I could achieve true integration and balance.

A few years later, I am doing some of both worlds. I love my new life—and I have a powerful urge to tell stories. But I find that it’s still very hard to find the right choice of words—to always acknowledge the truths of both sides.

I believe that many of those who argue most strongly for “their” side are working their way through the mourning process. They may be ripe to enter the next stage of mourning. They need “only” to step back and let go of their identity as “scientist” or “theologian” (or whatever) so that they can accept the truths in the other’s stance, and then integrate the best of both. Entering the bifurcation point is giving up, at least temporarily, everything you have believed in until now, everything you identify with, everything that made you famous: “Just die and you will be reborn. . . .” This is *not* easy! Your whole world collapses.

The time is “ripe” for a new story, in that a new generation has grown up under different circumstances with different cultural patterns than their parents—circumstances that have allowed some of the younger generation not to learn their parents’ dualistic habit, but to learn the habit of “both/and.” That’s why I believe that the cutting edge of *all* disciplines—science, religion, philosophy, art, architecture, economics, politics, agriculture, you name it—has embraced a variant of what may be called an emergence paradigm, and has done so at about the same time.

Those choosing this paradigm are trying to step *beyond* their ingrained patterns, to examine those patterns, to let go of them, to emerge with an open mind, and to choose their *own* stories. With that openness comes a natural desire to integrate science and spirituality. As the late systems scientist and sustainability advocate Donella Meadows wrote (using the language of her scientific background):

To keep oneself unattached in the arena of paradigms, to stay flexible, to realize that no paradigm is “true,” that every one, including the one that sweetly shapes your own worldview, is a tremendously limited understanding of an immense and amazing universe that is far beyond human comprehension. It is to “get” at a gut level the paradigm that there are paradigms, and to see that that itself is a paradigm, and to regard that whole realization as devastatingly funny. It is to let go into “Not Knowing,” into what the Buddhists call enlightenment. . . .

Everyone who has managed to entertain that idea for a moment or a lifetime has found it to be the basis for radical empowerment. If no paradigm is right, you can choose whatever one will help to achieve your purpose. If you

have no idea where to get a purpose, you can listen to the universe (or put in the name of your favorite deity here) and do his, her, its will, which is probably a lot better informed than your will. From “Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System,” (www.sustainer.org/resources.html)

More and more people are choosing the story of emergence over that of dualism, while continually experimenting and trusting their gut in search of an even better story. They are doing so because they value hope, diversity, and the fullness and unfolding of life in all its forms. With it, they are naturally integrating science and religion.

The good news from all this is that, over the past few decades, a small but growing number of parents and teachers have been raising young people in the emergence paradigm and teaching them to value diversity. These lucky young people have learned the *win/win* story from birth. This story has helped them develop hardiness so that they are accelerating their way through stages of consciousness in a different, healthier, and significantly more rapid fashion than previous generations. Stages that *used to be* dualistic for people earlier in history (including Boomers) are *no longer* so for those young people today. Thus, in this new story, not only are we evolving *higher* stages of consciousness for a greater percentage of people, but the earlier stages are themselves *also* evolving, and younger people can help their elders grow. There has probably never been a better time to look for the truth in unexpected people and places.

We are in the midst of turbulent times of global proportions. We are in a race for our lives: Will we destroy ourselves and our world, or will we and our culture transcend to the desperately needed consciousness of the integrating adult stage of our evolution? The process of developing the skills of adulthood is long, arduous, and fraught with trial-and-error. It is truly an epic and often-painful journey. But it’s a necessary journey if we are to avert global disaster. I wish you well on your way. May our paths meet in an emergent, integrated new world!



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