Hebraism, Hellenism, and Holism
Finding Sources of Life in Western Culture

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This handbook is being compiled in a time in which Western culture is in crisis. Yet, unfortunately, the people who seem to see this most clearly, and are acting most decisively to face this crisis, are the various forms of fundamentalists—religionists, free marketeers, and, most recently, political nationalists—who believe the only coherent road to the future is a decisive return to a somehow “great,” but isolated past, rather than seeing in these times the opportunity to creatively forge a greater vision to newly and more deeply unite the world.

A large question that holistic educators need to find some kind of coherent answer to in these times is, thus, How can we thoroughly reclaim the good in Western culture, in ways that promote not its dominance over other cultures and the earth, but human and planetary wholeness?

Quite a lot may come to hinge on whether we can find a coherent answer to this.

Of course, there is no way that a definitive answer can be found in a short essay. What I can do in a somewhat thorough and coherent way, though, is to testify how the two main traditional strands of Western culture, stemming from Athens and Jerusalem—alliteratively named “Hebraism and Hellenism” by the nineteenth century poet and educational theorist Matthew Arnold—have helped me find a holistic coherence to my own life, and have helped me help others find similar coherence.

Since the central concern of holistic education has traditionally been with the development of wholeness in the human person, I hope that you will find an account of the finding of such personal wholeness through a long search for the potential wholeness of a powerful and dominant culture—oft-disparaged for its vaingloriousness and fragmentation—to be meaningful and significant in envisioning how a world now dominated by that culture can eventually also be helped to be holistically transformed by it.

My experience of Hebraism and Hellenism has been in some ways the inverse of Arnold’s, who found “Hebraism” to be fundamentally characterized by a “strictness of conscience” that tended to be overbearing upon the Victorian culture from which he stemmed, and found “Hellenism” to be fundamentally characterized by a “spontaneity of consciousness” he thought could much ameliorate the strictness of that culture if education were to be thoroughly imbued by it. He was seeking a kind of golden mean between two countervailing influences.

What I have found, by contrast, is an attraction, on the one hand, to what might be called the “strictness of epistemic consciousness” in the Hellenic strand of Western culture. And, on the other hand, especially in recent years, I have found a deep attraction to the “spontaneity of
feeling—personally and interpersonally meaningful—or moral conscience” that has been opened
up to me by a newfound Jewish faith that is not in any way in conflict with the interests of uni-
versal philosophy, but rather comes as a direct existential consequence of its epistemic principles:
manifesting, moment by living moment, the personal moral intuitions that are the direct conse-
quence and living fulfillment of its universal concepts.

A “real teacher,” says Robert Inchausti in his *Spitwad Sutras: Classroom Teaching as Sublime Vocation* (1993), “takes [his or her] very life into speech, so that others may do the same” (p. 141) What I
have personally found to lie at the heart of Western culture, and the fully holistic interweaving of its
two main strands, is not the root of all the evil in the world—though certainly it has spawned more
than its share of such evil—but precisely the search for a definitive and permanent educative and life-
giving cure for the worst kinds of evils that our species has perennially, and across most all cultures
(Harari, 2015), inflicted upon one another and the earth.

Thus, what I try to do in what follows is to show, first, that there is a coherent holistic philosophical
method that can be discerned behind what Inchausti calls “real teaching”: a method that has been
more and more precisely and caringly developed over millennia of patient philosophical thought.
Then, second, I will show how I have learned to apply this method to the concrete particulars of my
own life, focusing on how it has entailed the personal appropriation over time of my Jewish heritage:
using the meaning I have found in my own life so as to enrich my capacity to evoke life in others,
to personally extend the love of personal wisdom so to help it eventually become the prevailing mode
of love in human life, overcoming the love of wealth and power that is now overtaking the globe
in unprecedented ways.

**Hellenism and Holism: The Search for More and More Holistic Conceptions of Life, and More and More Empathic Conceptions of Intelligence**

How to sum up over 2,000 years of trenchant thinking in a few pages? Perhaps the best place to start
is with Plato’s prognosis in the *Republic* that “unless there is a conjunction of these two things, politi-
cal power and philosophical intelligence, there can be no cessation of troubles . . . for the human
race” (1961, 473d). What I want to suggest is that this is, in a certain way, the central hypothesis of
Western culture, and the central gift of that culture to the human world, but that it has taken over
two millennia of experiments in thought and action to properly test it, and to refine it in a way
that it is readily realizable in the world. And that a philosophically conceived and democratically
implemented holistic pedagogy is the key to its realization, and can, once and for all, unlock the
bars of insane violence that have long thwarted its emergence in most all large civilizations, not just
the West.

In the *Republic*, of course, Plato concocted both a political utopia ruled by a few philosopher
*heads* and the first sketch of a metaphysical philosophical system, positing the basic principles of the
universe as the pure Ideas of the Beautiful, the True, and the Good. But the *Republic* ends with the
admission that this particular utopia could probably never become anything more than a “city of
words” (592b, cited in Cavell, 2004, p. xii) set up as a model for the right constitution of the rare
personal soul strong enough to seek wisdom in a crazed world, but not for any feasible political state
on earth. In the end, Plato himself sanctioned the divorce of “political power and philosophical intel-
ligence” whose marriage, he said, was essential to the salvation of our species.

Modern philosophy has sought to improve on Plato by making “philosophical intelligence” more
practical, and thus has given rise to a good number of political revolutions, the most successful of
which has been the current—though newly tenuous—world prevalence of representative democ-

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The most powerful strands of modern philosophy, which came eventually to be known as “science,” knowingly cast aside the pursuit of the beautiful and the good for the exclusive pursuit of “knowledge” in the sole interest of “power,” in Francis Bacon’s famous phrase. Baconian “mind over matter” “empiricism” has given a limited form of “philosophical intelligence”—the outward human empire over nature through technology—shallow outward rule over the whole earth. However, it was apparent to some very early on that humanity was being led down a potentially fatal blind alley by this unwise version of philosophy centered on mere outward power, as the root of empire at the heart of empiricism indicates. And that new patterns of “philosophical intelligence” embracing the beautiful and the good in more concrete ways than Plato and other idealists had been able to envision would need to be perceived and broadly implemented for a definitive end to be found for the “assault on humanity” (Sloan, 2005) initiated by a “science” that has eclipsed—and broadly and brutally usurped—the human orientation to the good and the whole.

The person generally agreed to be the first modern holistic educator, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, began his career in 1749, through a sudden epiphany that the scientific and technological “improvements” of modern life were having a drastically corruptive effect on human morals and human wholeness. His *Emile, or On Education*, in particular, initiated what one writer has called a “Platonic Enlightenment” (Williams, 2007), seeking to combine the best of ancient and modern philosophy, that has extended to today. This was furthered particularly through the philosophical system of Immanuel Kant, which generated the deeply influential educational thought of the American Transcendentalists. And from them stemmed the newly moral democratic politics of Lincoln, Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, among others, through whom a morally “philosophical intelligence” has gained many footholds in the mostly thoroughly immoral modern political world.

Yet, essential to a fuller political instantiation of morally democratic “philosophical intelligence” is a better basic mode of thinking than Kant’s, who believed in a quasi-Platonic, dualistic “metaphysics of morals,” and thus left physical empiricism’s truth claims about the workings of the material world relatively untouched, calling himself an “empirical realist, and a moral idealist.” While recognizing humanity’s fundamental orientation toward moral wholeness, he, at the same time, famously remarked on “the crooked timber of humanity that never could be made straight.” He believed in a set of rational moral intuitions that was the common possession of humanity, and believed at the same time that we were possessed of selfish inclinations that could never be eliminated, never brought fully and wholly under rein by “philosophical intelligence.” Where mind over matter empiricism eclipsed and occluded the beautiful and the good in the name of an all-powerful knowledge, Kantian transcendentalism exalted them over knowledge, but didn’t have a consistent way of connecting what we feel as beautiful and know as good to all of what we know to be true. That became the task of a mode of philosophy that came to be known as “phenomenology,” also called “transcendental empiricism” by its founder and greatest exponent, Edmund Husserl.

Where the motto of “mind over matter” empiricism is “knowledge is power,” showing it is based on the untested presumption that life is fundamentally about the acquisition of power for oneself and one’s tribe over others and things not oneself, the founding idea of phenomenology is that the very boundary between self and world is artificial and untrue. The world in which we oppose “I” and “it” is an illusion. Only the holistically relational world of “I” and “thou” is true. This deeper, grounding understanding, which Husserl called the *correlational a priori*, reveals that “The world and the world-experiencing [person] are dancing—at all times, on all levels, in all forms and shapes—a tango” (Luft, 2011, p. 15).

This fundamental understanding of life as a dance of all with all, not as a war of all against all, provides a philosophical *paraphysics* and a natural *parapsychology* that generates an *eductive logic* of empathy, an educative *ethic of care*, and a co-educative *politics* of meaning to replace the metaphysical oppositions between duty and inclination and between power and goodness plaguing even the sublime thinking of Plato and Kant (Novak, in progress).
Phenomenology thus methodically opens up an empathic and ecological vision of community and political life that can be constituted in such a way that everyone can become what Inchausti calls a “real teacher” of others. And the more that everyone seeks for and attains empathy, care, and meaning, the more the world itself becomes alive with and imbued with meaning. The mutual cultivation of empathic lifeforce results in the creation of a real lifeworld that is the full, living, intentionally created correlate of relational awareness.

The magical re-enchantment of life that we see in so many holistic schools is, thus, an image of how we can holistically re-create the world as a whole.

And holistic education becomes the means of awakening ourselves from the nightmare of what has hitherto constituted human history: the envisionment of a universal human awakeness to life and the gradual accomplishment of each person’s facility in dancing with it constitute the definitive end of the wars amongst ourselves and against nature that the West has certainly egregiously exacerbated, but did not initiate.

In his 1935 Vienna Lecture, Husserl declared that out of the ashes of what we now call “civilization”—but has become patently uncivil in Fascist states and is latently so in the fascination with technology and the resultant eclipse of humanity that the West had unleashed on the world—can arise a new humanism and a new humanity, arising like a phoenix out of those very ashes.

This is no less true today. And for it we will probably need both the methodical strictness of consciousness of philosophical phenomenology to encompass the dehumanizing aspects of an objective science falsely exalted as the supreme human accomplishment and the assiduous cultivation of the diverse lifeforce of a host of “real teachers,” in schools and beyond them. To produce the tremendous spontaneity of conscience now sorely needed to heal the many different wounds our species has come to inflict on the world through its newfound power over it. And so, to teach us not to dominate the world, but to dance with it.

Hebraism and Holism: The Story of Judaism Retold as the Search for More and More Holistic Intuitions of Life, through the Cultivation of the Seeing of Holy Meaning in Each Event of Personal Life

It is actually even more difficult for me to sum up the storied meaning of my own life in a few pages than it was to sum up the story of Western philosophy. The best way to begin, though, is with a cross-culturally historic moment occurring decades before my life began: the moment when the scion of Hebraic Hasidism, Abraham Joshua Heschel, became enamored with the Hellenic philosophy of Edmund Husserl. For those of you for whom the name of Heschel does not ring an immediate bell, you may be familiar with (or you can google) the picture of him, with his majestic white hair and beard, crossing the Selma bridge arm in arm with Martin Luther King. Heschel’s fascination with Husserlian phenomenology as a student in Berlin in the 1920s helped him come to see, a few decades later, that the wholeness of his own being and personal voice could be an essential force for the renewal of the holistic community of Judaism—whose central prayer, the Sh’ma (Deuteronomy 6:4), invokes a people’s careful attention to the hidden divine wholeness of creation—after its devastation in the Nazi Holocaust.

And out of Heschel’s vibrant voice eventually grew a global religious movement called Jewish Renewal, with which, over the past 20 years, I have become more and more closely affiliated, and which I have come to see as an historic source of life both for myself and for the world. It seems in no way an accident that the founder of this movement, the neo-Hasidic Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, became deep friends with the Dalai Lama, and occupied the World Wisdom Chair of Buddhist Naropa University for the last two decades of his long life.

From their first receiving of the commandments, the Jews have called themselves “a people of priests” (Exodus 19:6), a spiritual democracy. And Jewish Renewal, in my experience, has given a
pedagogical tilt to this, seeking to create a people of “real teachers” (and the Hebrew word “rabbi,” or “reb,” means nothing more than “teacher”): who, in Inchausti’s words, take their very lives—both as individual persons and as living members of this special people—up into transcendent speech and action, which helps others do precisely the same, both as individual persons and as members of whatever larger historical peoples they happen to belong to. Many are familiar with the Jewish toast “l’chaim!”—“to life!”—through the song of that title in Fiddler on the Roof. Jewish Renewal has, in a way, interpreted that toast as the utmost of ethical categorical imperatives: that the cultivation of empathically meaningful speech and action that brings transcendent life to an otherwise mundane world—the life that adds “to life” and blesses it (and the Hebrew word for “blessing” is *baruch*, which translates literally as “more life,” as Tony Kushner notes at the end of his epic play Angels in America)—is the fundamental manifestation of the divine, whether literally “Jewish” or not.

So, Inchaustian “real teaching” has come to be *my* Judaism. And, in some ways, it has been one of the great gifts of life in my life that it took most of the course of my life for me to be able to understand this.

I was raised Jewish in the “enlightened” Reform tradition. But my history with my heritage was a spotty one. When I was 14, I asked my dad, in typical 14-year-old fashion, if he thought he was God. And when he said, “Yes, I am the God of this house!” I immediately, intuitively and unthinkingly, became an atheist. In my late thirties I first became interested in, and then became deeply involved in, a political movement called the Politics of Meaning, led by Rabbi Michael Lerner, one of Heschel’s strongest disciples. But I didn’t really start on a path to claiming Judaism as my own until—at a Jewish retreat I mostly chose to attend to study with Rabbi Lerner—I encountered the gentler personhoods of two other rabbis, one of them a woman, who had been influenced more by Reb Zalman than by Heschel.

What it took in the end to solidify my relationship to my heritage, though, was a phenomenal epiphany that directly healed the wound that had long ago severed my relationship with it.

In the summer of 2015, nearly 60, I happened to put on a holistic education conference not far from Boulder, where Zalman had settled at the end of his life to teach at Naropa. And one of the attendees who was a friend of mine, and had also been a friend of his, knew that there was going to be a celebration of his yahrzeit there, the one-year anniversary of his death. This took the form mostly of two hours of extended Islamic Sufi dancing in a Boulder synagogue. That one friend and I, along with a female friend of mine with whom I was going through some personal difficulties, drove down to Boulder. Beyond being regaled with wondrous tales of Reb Zalman’s wondrous life, we encountered the sparkling eyes and moving bodies of person after person in the deep and transcendent ecumenicism of those circle dances—and in this seeing of and moving with one another we seemed to dance with the whole circle of life.

Once the dancing was done, I was able to make the acquaintance of many souls who since have grown to be of deep importance in my life. But, more importantly, this evening turned into the gateway for an ongoing series of transformative events that have increasingly bound the whole of my own soul to my Jewish heritage. Three such events, in particular, bear relating here. Through the first, occurring the very next night, Reb Zalman became my spiritual father. Through the second, a few weeks after, I came to feelingly reconcile with my birth father. And through the third, later that year, I came to be a kind of father, rabbi, and teacher to a group of fellow Jews to whom I could relate the process of my own healing as a kind of symbol for the historic healing of our people, and as a revelation of the deepest gifts it has to offer the world.

In 1988, when I was 31, my father who thought he was God, after a series of mishaps and bad choices, chose to leave life: becoming the God who killed himself. I, in turn, chose not to attend his funeral, and had never had a desire to visit his grave, which lay outside a small town in Nebraska. In 2014, though, a good friend, who had reminded me a lot of the best parts of my dad, happened to visit that town, and went of his own choice to the gravesite. He phoned me as he approached it,
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and read to me the inscription. It read “You were loved!” But I heard him say “You are loved!” And suddenly all the deep and lavish emotions I had felt for my dad as a child rushed over my being, and went out to my living friend at the same time as to my dead father.

By the time I attended Reb Zalman’s yahrzeit, I was not, for various reasons, consciously looking for that kind of intensely deep male bonding any longer. And when my female friend and I visited Zalman’s grave the night after the yahrzeit, at the invitation of a new friend we had met there, I made no conscious connection with my dad. But at one point, with many of the Rebbe’s closest friends and relatives gathered around the grave, this new friend began to sing a niggun—a Jewish spiritual nonsense song—that he had earlier written for and sung for Zalman. Magically, the friend with whom I had once been romantically involved, but now was experiencing some personal difficulties with, took my arm and put it around her waist. And something huge clicked deep inside me, opening the whole world in new ways. I suddenly felt deeply united both with the spirit of this sacred man—through these living gestures of these friends—and with the entire people whose goodness he sought both to represent and to cultivate. In a way, for the first time in my life, I had a human father, in Reb Zalman, and through him became a Jew who suddenly saw the whole of my humanity through the perspective of the life of this ancient people who had waveringly sought life over millennia, and been taught to do so a lot less waveringly by this wonderful man, this rebbe of rebbes, this real teacher of real teachers.

Not long afterward, I wrote to the friend who had gone to my dad’s grave, to commemorate the anniversary of that event, though even then not consciously connecting the meaning of the two events at the two gravesites. But when he told me he had been to Nebraska again and had considered putting a stone on the grave—as is the Jewish custom—but in the end saw that was for me to do, it at once became blazingly clear that I literally had a God-given mission: to take a pink granite stone I had been given at my conference and had placed on the blessed Zalman’s grave, and place it on the grave of the cursed man who had given me birth: precisely as a way of giving life again to a man who had chosen to remove himself from it in many ways, and not just through his suicide. So that I did. And I wept as I knelt and kissed the low gravestone.

Months later, I was able to sum up the meaning of this event at a Jewish men’s retreat I was attending thanks to the encouragement of the male rabbi who had helped me initially reclaim my Judaism back in 1998. After telling my story around the campfire on the last night, this was the moral to it I came up with: “Our people went through another holocaust than the one the Nazis delivered to us. This was a holocaust to which we delivered ourselves: the holocaust of pursuing worldly ‘success’ at all costs, the self-inflicted holocaust of the soul of which my dad was a victim. This was largely a holocaust of men who, like him, chose to pretend to be Gods in the limited domains of their businesses and homes, and so unthinkingly forsook the living God always urging us to life and its infinite wholeness. Had my dad and I been able to attend an event like this together, he might have chosen differently. And when I see fathers and sons praying together here, I also see my dad and me, and all the lifegiving experiences we might have had together had we had this kind of Jewish framework for our relationship.”

At that moment, a man who had become a great new friend—the night before he had, in fact, helped me write a letter to Reb Zalman on a Hebrew typewriter once belonging to him—came up and gave me a huge bear hug. And one of the founders of the event said that his hearing these words was a kind of capstone to the quarter century of work he had undertaken to create and build it, and through it to seek to build new kinds of Jewish men, more dedicated to life.

As I was preparing to leave the retreat, I realized I had another mission. My new friend had spoken around the campfire of the deep happiness he had discovered in his relatively new family. And I asked if I could make a quick visit to them on my way to visit other friends. We met at a park in the small town he lived in and then walked a few blocks to meet his wife and three very young children who were coming from a class they had all gone to. As soon as the children saw their father, there
came the most joyous squeal simultaneously from all three: “Abba! Abba! Abba! Abba!” they called to him in Hebrew. And these cries were yet another way of waking my dad from the dead, and of bringing new life to my world.

A Clash of Fragmented Civilizations? Or a Cosmopolitan Tango?

The presidency of Donald Trump, for me, has been something of an image of my dad’s coming back from the dead in quite another way: the mentality of pretended omnipotence and omniscience that killed him suddenly installed at the pinnacle of world power.

At this writing, we know not what holocausts may be in store.

But I think I can leave you with an image indicating that the lifegiving power of holism—if enough of humanity is educatively brought under its sway through real learning from real teachers—may eventually surmount the death-dealing power of holocausts brought about by humans vaunting themselves, and the differing cultures to which they belong, to be gods rather than vessels of divine life.

One of my new Jewish friends from Boulder is named Gabriella. After I had come to know her well, she confided in me that she had asked Reb Zalman to give her a new name to help her inaugurate a new spiritual emergence after a period of paralyzing depression she had recently experienced. “Gabriella” in Hebrew means, “she who is empowered by God.” And I felt it as a very deep honor when she later said that our new friendship has been a decisive factor in making that power a reality in her life, as she has learned to turn many of the challenges of mental disability into new spiritual ability, and has helped others do the same, in Inchaustian fashion, through a project she has called “Diagnosis: Human.”

This friendship also provided me with a deeply teachable moment I experienced not long ago with a young African-American man I am helping to mentor, named Gabe. The university identifies this young man. And, though we haven’t yet met in person as of this writing, we have had many conversations over the phone about his educational past, present, and future. From sixth grade through high school, he’d experienced challenge after challenge in the largely nonholistic schools he’d attended. But by the time we first conversed he had gotten solidly on his feet, attending a fine community college in California where he had found a fresh start. And he had developed strong aspirations to be a personal force for the healing of the many holocausts visited upon his own people—in many ways far worse than anything ever visited upon mine.

One day a few months ago, I was helping Gabe talk through some new challenges he was facing, and was searching for a hopeful way to end our conversation. Knowing he was an evangelical Christian, I asked him if he happened to know the Hebrew meaning of his given name, Gabriel. My new knowledge that it meant “the strength of God”—which in fact he did not know—was a holistic gift of meaning passed directly from Zalman, to Gabriella, to me, and finally to Gabe as he audibly choked up on hearing those words as a divine opening through the crisis he was then experiencing.

Since that time Gabe has been accepted as a transfer student to one of the top liberal arts colleges in the States. And the boost of confidence given by that, at the same time, accidental and intentional gift, and our pedagogical relationship which that gift encapsulated, were perhaps critical factors in his confidence to present himself in such a way that others had confidence in his ability to make that enormous educational leap.

Gabe’s leap was also a leap of meaning across cultures, and thus can serve as a symbol for the many more such leaps that need to be made in the new global world in which we all now live, which so many are finding personally and culturally threatening.

When asked why he refrained from obeying so many of the customs of his city, the philosopher Diogenes replied, “Before I am a citizen of Athens, I am a citizen of the universe, kosmos polites, and
my main object in life is to make myself one with the ultimate power of the universe, not just the limited power of my people.” This was the historic origin of the term “cosmopolitan.”

This word today has in some contexts become equilibrated with the morally lax, with the idea that freeing ourselves from traditional moral strictures frees us to wallow in hedonism—an object of legitimate fear by those with ties to tradition if that is the kind of cosmopolitanism the world actually chooses to follow.

But this was not Diogenes’ idea. He believed in higher meanings, not in the loss of meaning, when bridges beyond our particular cultures are made.²

My conversation with Gabe was a lot easier than the conversations that need to be held between, and within, the many fragmented nations, and other factions, of our global world. But I hope, nonetheless, that it can serve as an image for you of the great, divine power that can course through the world, as each of us learns holistically “to take our very lives up into speech so that others may do the same.” A hope that we can one day transform the many battles in which we are now engaged into what the Kantians Schiller and Beethoven called “diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt”—“this kiss of the whole world”—that we might now phenomenologically rename “the cosmopolitan tango”! And that the gifts of Western culture will supply their share of the genuinely divine music of that tango—dispelling at long last the deafening drumbeats of the march of mere human power, vaunting false divinity, with which that culture, over most of the course of modernity until now, has sought to dominate the earth.

Notes

1 The two central sections of the paper build on a famous saying of the philosopher Immanuel Kant—“Concepts without intuitions are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.”

2 See Hansen, 2011 for a full educational treatment of practices of cosmopolitanism in today’s schools.

References