

FIELDS OF DANGER AND THE WILDERNESS OF WISDOM

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Like cows in the dairy advertisement, professional people like to be outstanding in their fields. Fields assure safety, comfort, nourishment, and identity to those who inhabit them, and they provide a familiar surrounding where large surprises or threats are unlikely to occur. They are artificial spaces designed and controlled for maximum efficiency, fencing out whatever is unwanted or too complicated, and encouraging whatever single crop the field is intended to produce. Fields are intentional distortions of reality in the interests of tidiness and efficiency.¹

Left to its own devices, reality is neither tidy nor efficient, nor does it comfortably tolerate fences and fields. The real world is composed of astonishing patterns of complexity which shade and grade into one another in endless and random configurations. Its boundaries are fluid or permeable at all levels from the sub-atomic to the cerebral. Time, matter, energy, and mentality interact to create whatever exists with little regard for what is needed or appropriate. That is not to say that reality is necessarily chaotic, but merely that its processes are overwhelmingly complex and intricate. Reality is a wilderness.

and childrearing. The agricultural idea of field specialization proved easily applicable to social occupations and social structuring. It promptly replaced the ancient traditions of hunting and gathering, both of which, incidentally, are contemplative and philosophical activities which are fully in touch with a whole natural setting and which use the whole human being.² When agricultural and social specialization replaced hunting and gathering, mankind abandoned wholeness in favor of the fragmented but profitable way of life in the fields.

At the emergence of industrialized societies, a few centuries ago, the field metaphor was well established and ripe to be applied to the fencing of human activities into ever smaller and more intense specializations. Old fields were further subdivided (philosophy was transformed into a score or more of philosophical disciplines), new alliances among fields emerged (science formed a compact with a field called technology and they have been fussing over the boundaries ever since), and entire new fields were mapped out, such as advertising, insurance, social service, and a field called "education". Now virtually everyone can boast a field which is a part of personal identity more surely than one's gender, family, or personality traits. We have persuaded ourselves that specialization is a necessary condition of survival in an industrialized and overpopulated world. That may be so, but field specialization has also become one of the most dangerous threats to the healthy continuation of natural and human processes. Recognition of that danger is the best justification for holding this conference on the unity of the sciences.

Fields, we may assume, were invented as devices for taming reality and reducing natural complexity to more easily manageable proportions. Those Neolithic farmers who first hit upon the idea of raising single crops and enclosing their animals may not have realized the cultural importance of what they were doing, but they must surely have appreciated how easy it was to gather vegetable foods from a monocultural field and how gloriously simple hunting was when the animals could not run away. Farmer's fields became the enabling device which led to the domestication of plants and animals, permanent and elaborate human settlements, and stratified societies which allowed leisure to some people. Those gifted with leisure occupied themselves with philosophy and public affairs, but now these were divorced activities which bore little contact with the sensory and natural conditions of ordinary real life.

Such people as Plato and Aristotle fenced for themselves some very large fields of knowledge and praised the virtues of the contemplative life (cows in their fields appear to love contemplation, too). The benefits they gave to mankind have perhaps been enough justification for the labor of the many non-contemplatives who have always supported full-time thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, and like most of the people in this room. But of course everybody has a field, whether it be slavery or merchandizing or farming, or whether one is a woman whose field is assumed to include reproduction, housekeeping,

Fragmentation and the failure to perceive context are necessary consequences of field specialization which have become serious threats to human well-being and to the stability of natural processes. The fences which define fields tell us not only what is within the fence, but what must be kept outside it. So scientists avoid ethics, artists abhor science, and engineers ignore esthetics as topics foreign to their chosen fields and probably threatening to their efficiency within their fields. Knowledge is thus circumscribed and shielded from the contexts which alone can give it depth and meaning. Habits of field thinking lead us to act imprudently and to misunderstand what we know. The intellectual and emotional myopia of field thinking have their consequences for all of us to see in the massive disruptions of environmental crisis, in the threats of destruction from nuclear warfare and nuclear peace fare, and in the mono-mental chaos that comes from many minds locked in their compartments, failing to understand that there is a world out there that refuses to confine itself to the artificial boundaries imposed by field thinking. However efficient they may be in producing information, fields are necessarily crisis-laden, and they are incapable of producing what we most need: wisdom.

It may be argued that field specialization is not artificial at all, but is a normal human extension of the many tendencies toward specialization which are evident in natural evolutionary

processes. There is a big difference, however, between an ecological niche achieved through evolutionary adaptation and a specialized field created by human judgment. Speciation is specialization, as plants and animals are modified over time to adapt to environmental changes and to ecological succession. The governing principle here is for the organism to modify its own structure and behavior to suit the ever-changing circumstances of its surroundings. Field specialization, as it has been applied since Neolithic times by human beings, goes in exactly the opposite direction. Its purpose is to restrain and to modify the existing world--whether it be a body of land or a body of knowledge--to accommodate human wishes and to serve human ends. If humans were to use their knowledge of the world as other animals do, to adapt to natural environments rather than to control them, then we, too, would have niches rather than fields to live in, and we would be part of natural reality rather than at war with it.

Claude Levi-Strauss has given us the useful concept of "bricolage" as a major mode of human thought that is rooted deeply in our evolutionary history.³ The bricoleur (a French term for an inspired handyman, with no good English equivalent) is the student, teacher, or craftsman who creates useful things from cast-off odds and ends which others have found to be useless. "The bricoleur," says Levi-Strauss, "is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the

purpose of the project."⁴ In bricolage, "it is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of means: the signified changes into the signifying and vice versa."⁵ With what result? In bricolage, the result "will always be a compromise between the structure of the instrumental set and that of the project. Once it materializes, the project will therefore inevitably be at a remove from the initial aim."⁶ Bricolage is the mentality of synthesis, a technique for creating, learning, and expressing human understanding, using whatever is present and what remains from the past to achieve an integrating form. That is what mythical thinking does, and it is what scientific and philosophical thought might do if they were freed from the manipulative purposiveness imposed by field specializations.

Evolutionary history is itself a long story of bricolage, according to François Jacob of the Pasteur Institute in Paris. Jacob argues provocatively that "Evolution behaves like a tinkerer [bricoleur] who, during eons upon eons, would slowly modify his work, unceasingly retouching it, cutting here, lengthening there, seizing the opportunities to adapt it progressively to its new use."⁷ Unlike the engineer, the tinkerer or bricoleur does not have a grand plan or established criteria of excellence, but uses whatever is at hand to accomplish a creation that is likely to surprise even himself. The living forms that make up the natural world, including humanity, are the products of such tinkering. Jacob further applies the tinkerer's art to the evolution of the human brain: "the formation of a dominating neocortex coupled with the

persistence of a nervous and hormonal system partially, but not totally under the rule of the neocortex--strongly resembles the tinkerer's procedure. It is somewhat like adding a jet engine to an old horse cart."⁸ If that indeed is what our mental vehicle is like (mine usually feels that way), we had better drive with great care.

Bricolage and tinkering may seem like undignified methodologies for the conduct of evolution, science and philosophy. But consider the alternatives. What if there had been a conference of biologists at the beginning of creation to plan and implement the best possible strategies for the evolutionary development of life on the plant Earth? And of course there would have been a later conference of professional fields when it came time to introduce mankind, and another still when the development of human mentality was to be implemented. One can imagine gigantic trade-offs and compromises as engineers presented their cost/benefit analyses, as environmental impact studies were pursued, and as the professional societies and academic departments struggled with one another to assure that the needs of their respective fields were met by the new creation. I'll settle for our history of evolutionary bricolage, thank you.

What we have inherited from that history, our multi-leveled brain linked in many ways to our bodily functions and to our natural environments, is not a bad instrument for comprehending the world,

providing we do not restrict its functions by the erection of artificial barriers. We are capable of perceiving clearly a many-dimensional world, of feeling deeply about it, of relating to one another and to other species in many ways, of analyzing logically our experiences and thoughts, and of bringing unlikely aspects of our awareness into creative new combinations. We are evidently designed for wholeness, or at least we are capable of it. That we have nevertheless elected our own fragmentation by arbitrarily building borders around parts of our lives is one of our saddest errors.

It is an avowed purpose of our present meeting to search for absolute values in a changing world. Although I confess to feeling awkward at the use of the adjective "absolute" to describe any values ("relatively absolute" would seem more comfortable if it were not a contradiction in terms), my reluctance is at a minimum when I consider wisdom as a value. Although absolute as a value, wisdom is by nature a perception of relativity and relationships, and thus provides a satisfactory resolution to the contradiction in terms. It is an awareness of the wholeness of things which does not lose sight of their particularity and concreteness or of the intricacies of the relationships among things. It is where left and right brains come together in a union of logic and poetry and sensation, and where self-awareness no longer is at odds with perceptions of the external world. Wisdom cannot be confined to a field, nor is it a discipline; it is the consciousness of wholeness and integrity which transcends both.

Fields make us smart and fat, but not wise. However useful and efficient it may seem to enforce boundaries of knowledge in the interest of high productivity, our great need now is for the unbounded insights of wisdom. It is possible to raise a crop of information in a field, and perhaps even to cultivate knowledge, but no one ever found wisdom there. Wisdom grows in a wilderness context. It is the state of complexity understood and relationships accepted.

The interdisciplinary movement of which this conference is a part is not an academic fad, but a response to the growing need among people everywhere to find a new sense of integrity for their own lives and for their understanding of the world around them. It is in part a corrective movement intended to combat the fragmentation that has resulted from centuries of field specialization. But it is also a creative effort directed toward greater wholeness and integration of human knowledge. The fences must come down to correct past errors and distortions, but at the same time we must learn new ways to live in the wilderness of wholeness where our best hope for the future lies.

The search for wisdom will require that we re-think many of our values, that we restructure some of our institutions, and that we revise our notions of personal and professional identity. As I have argued elsewhere,⁹ a meaningful alliance among the value systems of science, art, and technology is now being created because of the new

necessities faced by each of those "fields". Education, too, is ordering itself anew in response to recent discoveries about the nature of the human mind and its learning processes,¹⁰ and as we increasingly discover that "training for a field" is not a sufficient purpose for education in a world where learning must be a lifelong process with many different stages and diverse focal points. And perhaps we are close to a breakthrough that will permit us to see our knowledge not as part of our personal identities, but as a common possession that links us to one another and to the world around us. Synthesis is in the air--which is a good place for it, well above the fields where fenceposts are anchored.

Let me also suggest a small experiment that might be tried during this conference. As you meet and chat with people here, I can predict that you will be asked several times the same insidious question: "What is your field?" It would be interesting to see what would happen if we all avoided asking that question of others, and if we try not to answer when it is asked of us. It might feel a bit naked without a field at first, but perhaps it would be a step towards climbing over the fences that limit our imaginations. And, of course, if we really feel pressed to answer, we could always say, "Why, my specialty is bricolage."

NOTES

1. See Joseph Meeker, "Academic Fields and Other Polluted Environments", Journal of Environmental Education, (4:3, Spring 1973).
2. Excellent insight into the philosophical, scientific, and social depth of hunting-gathering life has been provided recently by a number of significant studies, notably: Clause Levi-Strauss' The Savage Mind (University of Chicago Press, 1962); Ortega y Gasset's Meditations on Hunting (New York: Scribner's, 1972); and Paul Shepard's The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game (New York: Scribner's, 1973).
3. Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966, pp. 16-30.
4. Ibid., p. 17
5. Ibid., p. 21
6. Ibid., p. 21
7. François Jacob, "Evolution and Tinkering". Science, 10 June 1977, p. 1164.
8. Ibid., p. 1166
9. Joseph W. Meeker, "The Imminent Alliance: New Connections Among Art, Science and Technology", Technology and Culture, Fall 1977.
10. Joseph W. Meeker, "Ambidextrous Education: How Universities can Come Unskewed and Learn to Live in the Wilderness", North American Review, Summer 1975.