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The single goal and ancient wisdom

All the things are there. I can draw them, lay them out in a field, and they become all the bits of me, they make me who I am, or all the things that consume me. Once it would have been easy, to sit and decide, to give reasons for and against, and take out the knife to excise the excess, reduce the weight, reduce the clutter, reduce the demands.

But now it seems that this “being sensible” is a young, naïve answer. The surge of young enthusiasm would prefer it for life to be simple, with one big goal and everything else removed. Life is like the big race you have trained for and sacrificed (abandoned) everything else for, and there you are, eventually, standing on the dais with the trophy in your hands, a champion.

This is a modern answer. It is only ancient wisdom that questions it. It is only ancient wisdom that sees the damage along the way, and doesn't ignore it, or excuse it, or justify it. It is only ancient wisdom that looks beyond the single goal and the dream of success.

And it is only ancient wisdom that observes that this success looks very much like the conquering of other people. Not always, but so much of the time, enough of the time for it to matter. What is left when you give up the single goal? To know that, you have to first follow the single goal beyond its success. Everyone cheered, but then you couldn't surpass it any more, or you simply got older and couldn't compete, couldn't keep up the pace.

And there you have it, the necessary conclusion, the denouement. Surpassed, jaded, exhausted. And then, goal-less, for the goal has abandoned **you**. You can do it again. Find another goal that suits the time and your capacities, and give yourself to it, so once again you can shut everything else out and strive for the one goal. But we know there is the phenomenon of life collapse after the goal has let you go – the big goal that gave your life meaning.

That pathway is one of decline. The people who cheered you are not interested in you now, and the goal is gone, so everything that filled your life with purpose has fallen apart, retreated, crept away. In that emptiness and loss you sink, quickly or slowly, and soon you are recognised as depressed, alcoholic, withdrawn or mediocre. And you ask yourself: where are the champions of the single cause now? But they are not here; they are out conquering new audiences.

So what is the ancient wisdom? It is an old story that is told in many places around the world. It is told still, and will always be told while there are yet people. You are not cut off from it. It is in fact all around you. It is for you to step into it. It is in this story that the single goal reveals itself as a

perversion. The ancient wisdom examines the whole cloth, and when it finds that the thread has run awry, it looks for how to restore.

The ancient wisdom says we are these threads and are each and all part of it, and there are balances. It is good that people strive and achieve and master skills, but in the ancient time, it was always for the good of all, we were all woven into one harmony, and it was always life-enhancing.

So all those bits of my life, all those bits of your life, do not resolve into simplicity by the exercise of a knife. All those bits are elements in the field of your life, which floats in the field of everyone else's lives, all of us. And we float elegantly in that field or we flail about, wracked by guilt and sad memories and ego.

There is some humour in this. It is not carved slowly and irrevocably into stone. We could hold it more lightly. We could watch and see what carries energy at the moment, and disentangle ourselves from the strictures of convention, the ritual acts that take our time, the dead deities. Then our lives would lighten up.

We could simply know that we are in the field, in the process of becoming, and our wholeness (my wholeness, your wholeness) comes from thinking ourselves into the good of all.

You may find these words helpful (and ancient wisdom always has that purpose), but you might wonder what this thing is that sounds so vast, encompassing and authoritative, and yet seems so intangible. The paradox of ancient wisdom is that it calls on the vast store of truths we know and that have been known for ages long, but its intention is to deliver us into the present – free, aware, loving, and full of unrealised potential.

So ancient wisdom is the thread, the continuity of the spirit from ancient times, the spirit that has always been and still is, and which holds us all and intends our well-being. And it expresses itself as it finds possible through all peoples, their cultures and religions. We live, and we can grow and develop. We live, and we can do that with happiness and joy that is held in balance with correctness. Love and allow; it is not burdensome.

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Glenn is a writer and educator, having written, over many years, an extensive amount of commentary on ethics, human resources, employment law and training and development for professional and academic publications, and designed, developed and delivered a variety of training and education courses. He is a companion of the I Ching, an ancient Chinese wisdom philosophy. Glenn has written around ten books, including books on ethics and values, and accounts of his experiences in organisations, in alternative communities, and of living solitary in the bush.

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