

Liberal Arts: Disappearing? or Renewing?—Our Choice

Sister Adrian Hofstetter

At 91-years-old, Sister Adrian is a Dominican Sister of Peace living in an assisted-living Motherhouse, in St. Catharine Kentucky with about 40 other Sisters. She is the author of *EARTH-FRIENDLY: Re-Visioning Science and Spirituality through Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Rudolf Steiner* (Lindisfarne Books). A longtime teacher, environmentalist, philosopher of science, and peace and justice activist, her articles have appeared in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, various books, and in science and philosophy journals.

Are we losing the essence of our Western culture as our TVs and computers flood the airwaves with cheap and unhealthy products for body, soul and spirit? Our land, water and sky have become polluted with the debris or refuse of our journey into the wasteland of modern mechanistic science. This crisis is made manifest by Wendell Berry in a recent article in the Kentucky Courier Journal in his response to an earlier article in which four leading Kentucky College Presidents omitted the humanities and the liberal arts as relevant to an education in each of their institutions.

The humanities and liberal arts have had a long history in the Western world. From the time humans began searching for the meaning of life and its origin, their spiritual lives evolved from the mystery centers throughout the ancient world.

Miraculously, in the axial period of history (800 to 200 BC), without communication among them, there was an awakening of the great religious traditions in different parts of the world: Buddhism and Jainism in India, Lao Tzu, Taoism and Confucianism in China, the Hebrew Prophets in ancient Israel and the philosophers in Greece. This most extraordinary happening in the axial period of history obviously was preparation for the birth of Christ, for understanding his parables and for the resultant evolution of a new consciousness. It is this new consciousness, a second axial period to which we are witnesses in this 21st century. 1

Both Plato and Aristotle were guided from mystery centers as was revealed to members of the anthroposophic community in 1925 by Ita Wegman, MD (1876-1943). Dr. Wegman was a close associate of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). Steiner, from his spiritual research, had communicated much about the mystery centers to Wegman in response to her desire to see them come alive again.

Wegman, after visiting many of the sites of former mystery centers, explained that because the Greek: "Eleusinian Mysteries had reached a turning point," Plato left to Aristotle the recasting of ancient mystery knowledge into concepts. Aristotle, by developing intellectuality changed Plato's mythic conception of reality into a more conceptual apprehension of it, more down to earth. Wegman quoted Steiner as saying: "Aristotle's writing on natural science contained in thought-form the Eleusinian knowledge of nature." She continued: "What in the Eleusinia was called *Father*, in Aristotle's writing becomes *form*. What was called *Mother*, Aristotle describes as *matter*." [Italics added] 2

In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great provided their own monumental contributions to the humanities, building on the foundation thought of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and other early Fathers of the Church. According to Wegman, Thomas Aquinas "...instructed his pupil and friend Brother Reginald of Piperno in alchemical knowledge" 3

These great intellectuals of the 13th century also prepared the soil for the marvels of our scientific, mechanical world of computers, planes, Humvees, and now melted glaciers, thus forming the basis of the crisis we face today.

Fortunate for us, insight into ancient mystery knowledge is still available and has been for the last 27 years. Jean Houston has kept the memory of the Eleusinian Mysteries alive in mystery school sites in New York, on the West Coast and around the world. Those of us privileged to take part in her mystery schools, both in this country and at the place of the Eleusinian mystery center near Athens in Greece, know the depth of feeling that inspires one at this holy site. (www.jeanhouston.org/mysteryschool-new.cfm)

The history of this development of the humanities in the western world is brilliantly recounted by Richard Tarnas in his best-selling book, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped our World Vision*. In this 1991 book, Tarnas gives us a panoramic view of the remarkable development of the liberal arts in the Western world.

In 2006 Tarnas gave birth to another great book that had actually been in gestation before he authored *The Passion of the Western Mind*. This book, *Cosmos and Psyche*, includes the relationship of humans not just to the earth but reaches to their interrelationship with the cosmos. Tarnas correlates over 30 years of research of planetary alignments in the cosmos to the appearance of many of the great works of the humanities. For example, in the Axial period of history he found this period to be "...the only time in recorded history, when all three of the outermost planets, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, were in a virtually exact triple conjunction." 4

Another compelling spiritual and moral book which comes at this time of crisis for the liberal arts is David C. Korten's *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*. Dennis J. Kucinich, US House of Representatives, recommends it as "...a blueprint for an emerging majority. This book will help to change America for the better." 5

Arthur Zajonc's latest book *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry* is being used at Amherst College and other liberal arts colleges. Zajonc directs an Academic Program of the Center of Contemplative Mind. As former general secretary of the Anthroposophical Society and active in the Waldorf School movement in the US, Zajonc teaches physics as a liberal art.

Awe-Filled Wonder: The Interface of Science and Spirituality by Barbara Fiand awakens its readers to the radical transformation that science is now undergoing. Scientists, filled with astonishment at their findings, are speaking the language of liberal artists, of wonder and awe. Fiand seems to reveal ancient mystery knowledge for our time as Ita Wegman and Rudolf Steiner. Fiand quotes Ralph Harper who knew what Wegman and Steiner knew, "that space and time are constructs of our mind ... that implode in the mystery of now." 6

According to Wegman, anthroposophy as left to members of Steiner's International Anthroposophical Society is: "...not a dead body of teaching but rather an awakening body of wisdom for anyone who knows that it is Mystery knowledge newly arisen. If we unite ourselves to it, it works in a way which fructifies all domains of life. So that through Anthroposophy the formerly existing unity may once again arise: unity in science, art and religion." 7

Wegman claims: "Because the body was the temple of God and the temple concealed within itself the proportions of a human form and there with the harmonies of the spheres, so, for this Mystery-knowledge—arithmetic, geometry, music and architecture—were also transparent in their inner connections. We still have a last reflection of this inspired knowledge in the Seven Liberal Arts." 8

It could be that a new culture, a reenchancement of our world was seeded in 2008 when a million people around the earth engaged in an email study of the book, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's*

Purpose, with its author, Eckhart Tolle and Oprah Winfrey. If we consider Tolle's words: "...embody the awakened consciousness of life on our planet, including nature, because life on earth is inseparable from the human consciousness that perceives and interacts with it," awareness will follow of Eckhart Tolle's closing statement: "A new species is arising on the planet. It is arising now. And you are it." 9

The wealth of our Western culture is at hand. Will we turn it down for the empty advertising asking us each night to "call your doctor"?

1. *Christ of the Twenty-First Century*, by Ewert Cousins, Continuum, 1994.
2. *The Mysteries by Ita Wegman*, Temple Lodge Publishing. p 71.
3. Ibid. p. 27.
4. *Cosmos and Psyche*, by Richard Tarnas, Viking, p 409.
5. *The Great Turning*, by David C. Korten, Kumerian Press, intro. pages
6. *Awe-Filled Wonder*, by Barbara Fiand, Paulist Press. p 6.
7. Wegman, p. 73.
8. Ibid. p. 111.
9. *A New Earth*, by Eckhart Tolle, A Plume Book, p. 309.

Reprinted from LILIPOH magazine, www.lilipoh.com
Christy Korrow
Editor

LILIPOH Magazine
Phone/Fax 270-864-9345
christy@lilipoh.com