

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

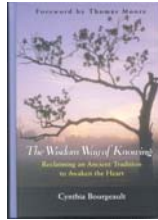


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## A life-transforming tradition

“If you’ve been raised a Christian,” writes Episcopal clergywoman Cynthia Bourgeault, “chances are you’ve never heard of the Wisdom tradition.” She describes it in her intriguing book *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* (Jossey-Bass, 2003).



This tradition, Bourgeault points out, has been part of all the world’s major religions, including Christianity, since their beginnings, yet it is unknown to many Christians. Like many others, Bourgeault finds this tradition biblical and potentially life-transforming. That sounds like something Christians shouldn’t be missing. Why, then, is it so little known?

## A way that can seem vague and scary

Evidently for three main reasons. First, in the Bible and elsewhere the Wisdom tradition shows up in metaphors that have little meaning for many people today, even for those who are hungry and searching for meaning and spirituality.



Second, wisdom as seen in this tradition isn’t easy to define. To many, the Wisdom tradition’s view of God and the world seems vague, abstract, and thus meaningless.

Third, what Cynthia Bourgeault calls “a Wisdom way of knowing” requires willingness to let God and other people see one’s real self, and that can be scary. Reciting creeds and singing hymns in church on Sundays is a lot easier and less threatening. Maybe that’s the main reason we hear so little about the Wisdom way in our churches.

Let’s look at what the Wisdom tradition is about, and at how it might help us become more aware of God’s presence and God’s will for our lives.

## No need to be a monk

It’s not necessary to be a scholar, a monk, or a mystic to use the helpful spiritual practices that are part of the Wisdom tradition, Cynthia Bourgeault assures us. Some time and effort are necessary, and she finds a certain capacity for “out of the box” thinking necessary, too, but in her view, what matters most is to be willing and to get started.



In *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, Bourgeault includes practical suggestions for getting started. She discusses meditation, whose immediate purpose, she says, is to interrupt our usual ways of thinking temporarily so that we can become aware of God’s presence. She finds meditation is best learned from a teacher, not a book, and she prefers Centering Prayer as taught by Thomas Keating.

## Wisdom’s tool par excellence



The practice Bourgeault most fully describes is *lectio divina*, the method of meditative scripture reading that she sees as the Wisdom tradition’s most valuable tool. She finds it to be the simplest and most natural of all the traditional spiritual practices.

In addition, Bourgeault briefly discusses sacred chanting. Unfamiliar to many Christians today, in Christian tradition it has centered on the psalms. She sees chanting as central to all sacred traditions worldwide, and for good reason. In her view, it awakens the heart while also helpfully affecting the body.

## More help with the Wisdom way

For more help with spiritual reading, prayer, fasting, spiritual direction, and other traditional spiritual practices, I suggest the new edition of *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, by Marjorie J. Thompson (Westminster John Knox, 2005). In it I especially appreciated her advice for times when corporate worship is “a source of frustration rather than fulfillment,” since for me that happens often.



For starting or continuing on the Wisdom way, both of these authors give help and encouragement.

## A vision, plus help in seeing it

I think of wisdom as the perceptiveness and good judgment that come from experience and knowledge, but apparently that's not exactly what the Wisdom tradition mainly refers to. It's mainly about a way of seeing God and thus seeing human purpose and destiny, and a systematic training for developing that way of seeing, aimed at transforming us.

Bourgeault finds the Wisdom tradition's spiritual practices very similar in all major religions. In all of them, what she calls "the nuts and bolts of transformation" are surrender, detachment, compassion, and forgiveness. No one religion, however, includes the ancient Wisdom tradition's whole vision of God and the world.



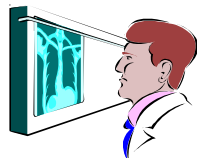
## Views that are and aren't hidden

The pictures of God and the universe that come from the Wisdom tradition still exist, Bourgeault assures us, and they aren't hidden. "In the Christian West," she observes, "they are strewn liberally throughout the entire sacred tradition: in the Bible, the liturgy, the hymnody and chants, the iconography." But these antiquated containers hide rather than reveal Christianity's power and truth, for many people today, so its meaning *is* hidden, for them.

Many seekers in the Western world today, however, are rediscovering some of the valuable Wisdom-related practices that mainstream Christianity forgot. But the wakeup call is being sounded more by the cutting edge of science, especially quantum physics, and to some extent by non-Christian religious traditions, rather than by the church.

## X-ray vision

Bourgeault explains that the goal of the Wisdom tradition is not mystical vision as we usual think of it. Instead, it is a sort of x-ray vision. It's a way of seeing through what we perceive of the physical world with our five senses, to find the deeper meanings that go beyond the obvious. It's seeing patterns and connections in events that at first seem to be random or accidental. It's recognizing



when events that happen at the same time have a connection to each other, even though on the surface they look like mere coincidences.

## Energies that have an impact

The Wisdom way, Bourgeault explains, recognizes a divine energy running through all of creation. It sees that qualities such as attention, will, prayer, and love have a real impact even though at present they aren't measurable.

These qualities may seem unreal to rational intelligence working alone. But the non-rational realm in which they apparently operate has been extensively described by mystics, theologians, and visionaries of all the great spiritual traditions, and it's real.

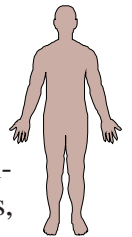
## Balancing the three sources of Wisdom

The x-ray-like vision that is Wisdom, Cynthia Bourgeault emphasizes, comes through the body, mind, and heart. To read the clues in our scriptures and religious traditions, we have to bring the mind, body, and heart into balance, and to wake up.



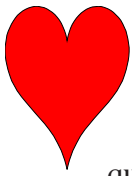
◆ When we think of wisdom we tend to think mainly of the mind and rational understanding. But wisdom goes beyond this.

◆ Wisdom also comes through the body. It includes instinctive processes that regulate the body's inner operational systems. It also includes our outward, voluntary movements and rhythms. Our bodies, Bourgeault finds, have unique abilities to understand some of what our minds can't grasp.



This body-related understanding happens through religious rituals, I assume, but Bourgeault emphasizes its happening through rhythmic labor. Her examples include ironing, chopping vegetables, raking leaves, and trimming houseplants. That encouraged me at first, to think that these chores could serve a purpose I hadn't seen. But for such jobs to serve as spiritual practices, Bourgeault warns, we can't "just go through the motions, day-dreaming or lost in an interior dialogue of agendas." Oops—that rules out my usual way of doing those jobs!





◆ The other way in which we receive Wisdom is through the heart. But the heart in this sense isn't what Bourgeault calls "that sticky, sentimental, confused quality so characteristic of the smaller self" that we often call heart, especially in the church.

"Far from revealing the heart," Bourgeault finds, "Wisdom teaches that the emotions are in fact the main culprits that hide and confuse it. The mark of personal authenticity is ... how honestly we can look at where our feelings are coming from and spot the clinging, manipulation, and personal agendas that make up so much of what we experience as our emotional life today."

The heart's most striking capacity, according to Bourgeault, is being able to deal with logical inconsistencies without needing to resolve them, shut down, or protect oneself from the pain that ambiguity often brings.



In Bourgeault's view, if the heart is awake and clear, it can directly receive and reflect God. It serves as a bridge between the mind and body, and between the physical world and the "invisible other realm."

## Recognizing the Kingdom of Heaven

The x-ray-like vision that is Wisdom, Cynthia Bourgeault points out, lets us recognize what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact, during his earthly lifetime Jesus was seen as a "master of Wis-

dom" by his immediate band of followers. That was a well known title in the culture in which he lived, Bourgeault reminds us. And with the

"The Kingdom of Heaven is within you."  
—Luke 17:21



clear vision of Wisdom, what he called the Kingdom of Heaven is seen not as a place to go after death but rather as a way of being fully alive, present, and transparent to the light of God here and now.

Wisdom lets us see through outward appearances and respond directly to what Bourgeault calls "their innermost aliveness and quality." Wisdom lets us experience what virtually all spiritual traditions call enlightenment.



## Presence is the gate

Bourgeault finds all the major religious traditions strongly saying that Wisdom can be given and received only in a state that the Wisdom tradition calls "presence." It requires mind, body, heart to be engaged and awake. Lacking it lessens our ability to recognize God and God's influence in the world and in our individual lives. "Presence," Bourgeault observes, "is the straight and narrow gate through which one passes to Wisdom."

## Surrender is the key



The key to Wisdom and presence, Cynthia Bourgeault finds, is surrender. To promote it, she suggests, deliberately and continually resist the urge to brace oneself internally into a rigid, tense state. (Practice this, she suggests, while waiting in grocery lines. Traffic tie-ups would no doubt be good opportunities, too.)

The surrender that opens the way for Wisdom is a letting go, a dying. However, it's more often inner surrender than outward surrender. It's not rolling over and playing dead. In fact, this kind of inner surrender often en-



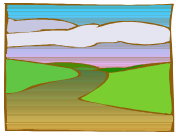
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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

ables us to recognize an outward action that is needed, and to do it with courage and strength.

### It takes only an inner yes



An inner yes is all it takes to set out on the path toward the kind of Wisdom the Bible and Christian tradition speak about, Bourgeault finds.

“Once the willingness to begin takes over in you,” she assures us, “whatever you need will come to you. And you’ll be able to recognize it. ... So there’s no bad place to begin. Simply open your heart and ask, trusting that the gift will come. Do

what you can where you are. And be alert for the next step. However it leads you, your heart will know the way home.”



How might individual lives, the church, and the world be different, if more of us followed this wise advice? I suspect we’d see some welcome changes.

*Barbara*



## Connections

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# A life-transforming tradition

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Get wisdom; get insight ... Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

—Proverbs 4:5-9



If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

—James 1:5

Where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Mortals do not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living. ... God understands the way to it and knows its place.

—Job 28:12

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

—1 Corinthians 1:24

Wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

—Proverbs 8:11



The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

—Psalm 111:10