The Big Book of Wisdom

What is it? Why do we need it? And how to get it.

By Larry Culliford

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Larry Culliford, the author of this timely book, is a member of the group of psychiatrists who founded the Spirituality in Psychiatry Special Interest Group (SPSIG) within the Royal College of Psychiatrists back in 1999. Last year he fittingly spoke at a celebratory event at the College marking the 20th anniversary of the SPSIG.

The title of this book is a playful one. It is not a big book in terms of size or numbers of pages, but its scope is big. This introduces a lightness of tone which is refreshing in a book addressing serious and weighty issues. The primary aim of the book is to “promote extensive, fruitful discussion on the subject of wisdom, human suffering, spirituality and the path to maturity”. A secondary aim is to provide ”a sound basis, guidance and encouragement for the many who may be inclined to investigate, deeply and personally, the universal mysteries…..by embarking upon a new start in life in search of wisdom”.

Personally, I found it helpful to begin this book by reading the author’s notes at the end. These provide a useful explanation of the origin of the book and how the author’s own personal and professional journey yielded this fruit.

The book is divided into three parts. The first entitled “Explanation: Things you may want to know” begins with an overview of what wisdom is and why it is so necessary to cultivate this in the world at this time. The author defines wisdom as the “knowledge of how to be and behave for the best of all concerned in any given situation”. He goes on to explain how many of the current troubles in the world have their origin in a lack of wisdom. He continues with further chapters on the range of spiritual experiences, ideas about psychospiritual maturation, psychological response to threat and loss, brain laterality and the important distinction between the everyday ego and the spiritual self.

Part 2 is entitled “Commentary: Things you might want to think about”. It draws on the ideas presented in Part 1 and how they might relate to the varied fields of politics, leadership, religion, education, economics and art and creativity. Of particular relevance to College members, is the chapter on “Health, Mental Health and Social Care”. The author reminds us that the caregiver’s first priority is, paradoxically, to care properly for oneself. He goes on to give details of a short course on spirituality and healthcare which he offered to third year medical students. Amongst other things, they learnt how to take a spiritual history. After taking such a history, one student reported “I have been a medical student for three years and that’s the first time I have come away feeling I’ve actually helped somebody.”

The final part of the book is entitled “Seeking Wisdom: Things you may want to do”. This includes a thoughtful section on the importance of grief work in which the author states that the “grief process flows naturally in the direction of healing and growth”. Drawing on well-established ideas he goes on to offer suggestions as to how one might cultivate wisdom.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book. Its overarching message is the importance of becoming aware of the essential unity of all creation. This realisation is the gateway into true wisdom. During these uncertain times Larry’s book offers a genuine tonic and encourages us all to reflect both on ourselves and on our relationships with each other and with our planet.

Andrew Clark