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The Dark Side of Wisdom *Wisdom in Dark Times*

I have had on my shelves an intriguing anthology entitled **Crazy Wisdom** for quite some time. It is an eclectic collection of stories, teachings, poems and aphorisms from around the world that seem upside-down and backwards to the conventional mind. If you think about it, the beatitudes in Yeshua's teaching do much the same thing. You could call these aphorisms a form of "crazy wisdom" because they stand common sense on its head. There are other examples of this genre of wisdom expressed in crazy playfulness, such as the famous Mulla Nasruddin stories of old Persia. The Mulla made people laugh before they thought about what he actually said. There are universal examples of similar wise fools in almost every part of the world. We sometimes call them court jesters and "clowns of God." Such individuals intend to wake people up through satire and comedy. Here's a comical example of this humorous genre of wisdom:

A philosopher made an appointment with Mulla Nasrudin to have a scholarly discussion. When the day came, the philosopher dropped by Nasrudin's house as planned. However, Nasrudin wasn't home. The philosopher angrily took his pencil out of his pocket, wrote "Asshole" on Nasrudin's door, and then left.

Nasrudin finally came home later and saw this. He quickly realized that he had missed his appointment, and he darted off to the philosopher's house.

"Forgive my error," Nasrudin told the philosopher when he got there. "I totally forgot about our appointment today. But when I got home and saw that you had written your name on my door, I came here as fast as I could."

The ancient Hebrew tradition expressed another contrarian stream of wisdom that I am calling "dark wisdom." It is not playful in the least. It is deadly serious. It is about wisdom in a world of apparent absurdity. We are familiar with the troubling and difficult story of Job as an example. Another text is the neglected book of Ecclesiastes, also in the Hebrew Bible, which is full of wisdom as an expression of the dark and unsettling side of traditional Hebrew sapience.

We are living through a dark and troubling period of human history. We need wisdom in the absurdity of it all. As we stand at the apex of our brilliant technology, stunning innovations, and in the “dazzle of western culture,” we have also entered a world where normal civil discourse is under threat in the shadow of a carnival-barker presidency. The circus of political chaos is all around us as societies across our world move ever closer to authoritarian (anti-democratic) rule. The earth itself is sliding into greater and greater ecological collapse. It is precisely here, in the middle of social and political darkness, that we need wisdom’s critique, the prophetic voice of warning and guidance.

It is apparent that we also live in a state of collective denial about our worsening condition. Climate change deniers, for example, champion their position as some form of macabre patriotism. This is not unlike individuals who deny personal health problems until they are near death. Denial is a kind of mental trap that allows us to hide from the urgency of the situation. Denial is a sinister exploitation of ego-consciousness by the ego itself. In the end, such consciousness may bring about not only our own rapid demise as a nation, but also planetary death. Our national and human condition is dire, and one wonders if the dark wisdom of the ancient Hebrew writers might be a corrective to our own contemporary magical thinking? Ecclesiastes is hard to listen to. Its aged author had seen a thing or two in his world, and his insights ring startlingly true today.

His words are clear-eyed and unequivocal. They are wisdom’s critique of what we like to call the “real world.” Through what he has learned and observed, he draws deeply personal conclusions about what actions he must take. We will draw conclusions different from his perhaps for our world, but only when we have the same clarity of seeing and the strength of voice to declare the truth of it.

~~ Abbot Lynn