

Wisdom, Spirituality and the Virtuality of Self: An Interview with Jonathan Rowson

Jonathan Reams¹

I had the good fortune of meeting Jonathan Rowson in the fall of 2013 at the offices of the RSA in London. I have also had the opportunity to read his Ph.D. thesis on *From Wisdom Related Knowledge to Wise Acts: Refashioning the Concept of Wisdom to Improve Our Chances of Becoming Wiser*. On my first reading of it, I felt like I had taken a journey, gently guided by a mind floating along a stream of intellectual thought, research, public opinion and more, somehow navigating his way through all of it in a way that opened new horizons of how wisdom can be conceived.

When undertaking this special issue, I wanted to find a way to include Jonathan's work. I didn't just want him to write an article based on his thesis, although that would have been nice. I managed to arrange for an interview, and have provided a brief set of reflections (also in this issue) on his thesis aiming to summarize it and entice readers into reading it for themselves.

The interview itself was stimulating, wide-ranging in scope, and heartfelt in the degree of personal engagement Jonathan brought to it. Reading the transcription for the process of ensuring accuracy and cleaning up things, I again found enthusiasm and energy rising. There was at times a real felt sense of tension in the conversation and in the lived experience it was describing, as we were drawn into enacting the qualities described to the best of our abilities. It is my and our hope that you enjoy listening in while reading.

Jonathan's current formal bio is as follows:

Dr Jonathan Rowson is Director of the Social Brain Centre at the RSA. After degrees spanning a range of social science disciplines from Oxford and Harvard, Jonathan's Doctoral research at the University of Bristol featured an analysis of the challenge of overcoming the psycho-social constraints that prevent people becoming 'wiser'. He writes for The Guardian's Behavioural Insights Blog, was formerly a columnist in the Herald, Scotland's national newspaper, has authored three books, and is a chess Grandmaster and former British Champion (2004–6). He recently authored: *Spiritualise: Revitalising spirituality for 21st century challenges*.

The interview took place on the morning of December 16th, with the aid of various technological mediations. Given that we have same first names and last initials, it was easiest to distinguish us by using last names.

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Reams: Jonathan, first thanks for taking the time to do this interview. I'll say I've thoroughly enjoyed reading and then re-reading your thesis: From Wisdom Related Knowledge to Wise Acts: Refashioning the Concept of Wisdom to Improve Our Chances of Becoming Wiser.

Rowson: Thank you.

Reams: My first question would be do you feel a little bit wiser from having done that?

Rowson: Well, I finished it about 6 years ago and I was motivated to finish it by the main thing distracting me at the time, which was the election of Obama. So it was November 2008 that I submitted it and I remember the lead up to it had this trade-off between the distractions of the American presidential election and actually writing the report. That's just to give people some historical context for how long ago it was.

Going through the process I don't think it would be right to say a resolute no, it hasn't made me any wiser, but nor would it be right to say yes. The truth is there's a connection between untangling one's thoughts about something and knowing what you're seeking in the world. There is something about that process of seeking that leads towards wisdom.

So although it doesn't in itself make you any wiser, it can be quite useful underlabor. For example, writing the thesis made it abundantly clear to me just how important practice was. There's a notion of experiencing and methodologically undergoing certain things to have a chance of being wiser when it matters. So in and of itself the writing does not create the wisdom. But it does create a way to unfold that might help you get there.

Reams: What kind of things are in tension with this? I know later in the thesis you describe moving from the positive description of the how, what and where of wisdom toward describing wise action. But then you also take a chapter to look at some of the things that, if this is so obvious, why don't people do it? What is your sense of that tension?

Rowson: Wisdom is a concept that invites a lot of folk understanding. It is part of our everyday lexicon and it is symbolized in songs and books and people have a certain implicit understanding of what is meant by wisdom.

What the thesis was about is on the one hand how adequate that folk conception is and what literatures are there to sense different ways of looking at wisdom. Then what do I as the writer and researcher think about all that? In that context it became clear to me when I think of the moments that I'm most moved by what seems to be something wise, when I'm struck by a certain receptive quality or empathetic quality or some ethical conviction that is somehow enacted; when I see those things coalesce in a particular moment I think: Wow, that's what I'm looking for. Whatever that was is a quality that I'm trying to unpack here.

Now what that means for means for me is a recognition that on the one hand such things can emerge spontaneously without prior preparation. But it's also clear there are barriers

for that kind of presence of mind and heart in the right moment. And those barriers ears include the ego, they include self preoccupation, they include a lack of mental complexity to actually bring into one's own mind the perspectives of others and those things together are the kind of pathways you need to undertake so you have a greater chance of acting wisely; even if it doesn't in and of itself create the act and even if that act does not depend upon those prior forms of preparation.

There does seem to be quite a strong correlation between working on one's self, for instance through thinning the ego and gradually growing in our capacity for perspective taking, and growing in empathetic communion with others. The moment for wise action tends to arrive in situations that are socially and ethically complex; a an act or decision or even just a form of words, but being able to do the right thing as those conditions arise. These things – becoming wiser and acting wisely – do seem to be connected.

Reams: Right. Then that leads me to two different tracks I want to make note of here. One is that in your thesis you describe Robert Kegan's work and how moving towards a fifth order transformational mind rather than a self authoring mind seems to describe characteristics of that are very much aligned with what you just described in terms of being able to take multiple perspectives and integrate them and even have a perspective on your own perspective.

Yet in your thesis you also moved away from trying to base wisdom as being directly related to those later stages of cognitive development. Can you reflect on that for a moment?

Rowson: Ok. On the one hand you have these maps of post formal thinking sometimes described as adult development. Certain integral theories and some of these maps are very, very sophisticated, classically involving quadrants of different kinds, bringing in social and cultural influences, the relationships between interior and exterior aspects of consciousness, and so forth.

There are these models out there and they're mostly theoretical. Some of them have some empirical validation and others don't. So on the one hand you have all that rich and interesting intellectual stuff, and on the other hand you have the visceral, vivid felt sense of what it is to be in the presence of somebody wise, or to observe a wise action. Then the question becomes: How are these two things related, if at all?

Let me give a brief anecdote and come back to this question to contextualize it. A couple of days ago I was responsible for looking after five five-to-six year old children. It was an after school play date and I had to take them all home from school. I was the only person looking after them and, of course, with five young children and twenty young limbs it's difficult to keep track of what's going on.

There is a busy main road on the way home from the school. It's a short walk but it's slightly dangerous; a fairly dicey, slightly nervy situation when walking with five young kids. At one moment my son was getting quite distressed because I was trying to hold his

hand while also trying to hold another child's hand with the same left hand. He was getting distressed because he didn't want to share and also he wasn't that comfortable.

The girl who was holding his hand and mine as well looked at me and saw that there was a slight, well, she looked at my son and saw there was this problem and without saying anything she kind of smiled at me and crossed over past me and went to the other side and held the hand of another child and we carried on walking. And she gave me a little look as if to say: Is that better now?

Now that happened quietly and unobtrusively and I wouldn't go so far as to say it was wise. It would feel like a stretch to call an act of a five year old wise but in that moment she picked up on a huge number of subtle cues as to what the correct course of action was.

I'm sure if you did a developmental study of this five year old you wouldn't find anything like the kind of perspective taking qualities one would expect or need for wise action. But nonetheless, I wouldn't want to say that there wasn't an emergent, proto quality of wisdom in the kind of perception that she had.

I guess that's the long way of saying I'm not locked into linking wisdom too closely to a particular developmental theoretical model because there is something beautiful about the freshness of a particular act by almost any kind of person in any given moment.

In contrast, not being fully ensconced in the world of integral theory but knowing enough of it; having read a fair amount of Wilber and Kegan and a few others, my feeling is that these concepts, if I stop being seduced by them intellectually and just stand back from my mind and stop finding these models so delicious and interesting, all these pathways and maps and terrains of how one can progress, and I just stand back for a minute, they all feel, well, a little *heavy*.

You know if I'm honest, the felt sense of these models is that, yes, they're intellectually delicious, yes they speak to our experience in a quite a profound and illuminating way. But there is also a strong sense that they are 'not it'. In the old Zen sense, they are the map not the territory, and while we need good maps there is something about the territory that gets lost when you fixate on them too much.

Reams: It's very interesting how you describe this. There are two distinctions I'd like to make in relation to that. One is that in this special issue where our interview will be published there are two other theses where the researchers looked at people who were nominated as wise from various criteria and even were scored on different measures of wisdom and were given ego development assessments. What they found in both of those is that there is not a strong correlation between late stages of cognitive development and wisdom.

Rowson: Right! And that doesn't hugely surprise me. We are in complex terrain here because it depends on how deep you want to go, but my mind is bringing forth various things. First, it's the basic ontological question of; if wisdom is a feature of reality in what does it

inhere? Does it inhere in a particular cognitive apparatus that could be unpacked in neural terms? Does it inhere into intersubjective complexity such as relations between minds, or perhaps between bodies in a given social cultural environmental context? Or is it somehow downloaded from above in some sort of divine or creative insight that is strictly unpredictable and uncontrollable?

I think most people would want to say it's a little bit of all of those things and also something about their coalescence. So I would imagine these developmental pathways might sometimes be necessary without having sufficient conditions inherent in them. But there's something very sweet, simple, almost innocent about wisdom that doesn't seem to require complexity of insight.

Reams: Let's look at that.

Rowson: This can apply in the situation like the one I mentioned and various others; a kind of visceral, slightly breathtaking quality of a simple grasp of what needs to be done in that moment, or a form of words that really connect deeply with somebody. And that's all true, as far as it goes.

But on the other hand, these developmental models are very important for pointing towards what it means to grow as a person. I think the idea that there is no connection between growth and wisdom would be pretty problematic because I think part of what we think of as wisdom is something that one grows into or acquires through experience.

Reams: Right. So there is something in what you're saying that I think might fit with the notion of two different distinctions. One is that we're talking about stage development and in a way we're talking about wisdom as a kind of general virtue of character that a person carries that enables them to be more likely to act wisely and not be hung up by their ego or a lack of empathy or whatever.

But we're also talking, I think, in your story about the five year old girl, about states and wise acting rather than a generic sense of wisdom.

Rowson: Yes and when you say states what do you mean exactly?

Reams: I'm just thinking that state experiences in integral theory, at least in Wilber's model, are related to temporary things. You can have a peak experience, a momentary insight of something.

Rowson: Okay so you're talking about states, streams and stages.

Reams: Yes.

Rowson: I know where you're coming from now. Yes that's right. I think it's Wilber who says these things are separate and need to be distinguished but they're not completely

unrelated either. As I understand it, certain stages are more likely to give rise to certain states even if they don't strictly reside in them.

Reams: Right. So I'm trying to weave a number of things from your thesis together here. We're in this place at the moment where we have this example of the five year old girl in a way doing some act that we could say has some characteristics of wisdom. We wouldn't call her a wise person necessarily but we could say she acted wisely in that context in that moment. She didn't pull a tantrum or whatever.

Rowson: Yes.

Reams: You also talk later on in your thesis, and I want to get into this more later, but as a way to introduce it now, you talk about Francisco Varela and the notion of the virtuality of self.

Rowson: Yes.

Reams: I have this image suddenly when you're describing this girl and we're talking about states as opposed to stages and wise acting, that there is some way in which this virtuality of self leaks through a person and enacts itself in some act that people look and say that was wise. Does that make sense?

Rowson: Yes it does. This virtuality of self idea needs a little unpacking. Most people who will be reading this probably know this broad domain, and will immediately associate it with Buddhism and the concept of annata or no-self. It is closely related to that. It's a fundamental insight that also goes back to people like David Hume and the Western tradition, many who recognized that if you examine your spirit closely there is no essential self or ego to be found. There are mainly fragments of experiences and thoughts that pass, but no particular sense or locus around which these arrive.

Varela has a nice expression for this. He says, "There's no landing platform for experience," which for me was quite an evocative way of putting it. If you imagine experience as the thing we experience, the thing that's going on in our psyches, there isn't a place where that settles. There is no self to bring that contingent flux into its bosom. There is just this experience that's going around.

Of course, in models like Kegan's you'll see that you have self authorship and have a sort of self locus to make sense of that experience, and structure and order and make judgments about it and so forth. But I think nonetheless the more deeply one goes into certain meditative practices the more you can see that yes, there isn't really an essential self. However, that's not to say the idea that there is no such thing as a self actually makes any sense! Because clearly that's how we experience the world, and the self has a lot of functional social and cultural relevance. It's an integral part of how we relate to other people and make sense of the world.

Again, we're in one of these paradoxes or contradictions where you want to say simultaneously the self is extremely real and very much at the center of our lives, but also fundamentally unreal. And the term "virtuality" that Varela uses I found quite helpful for that because, we know virtuality through the virtual which we often describe as the internet, forms of the internet. But virtuality also gets at the notion of fragility and not quite being real as well.

So to speak of the self as being virtual is to acknowledge simultaneously that it's not what we assume it to be in everyday life, but equally that it's not completely non-existent.

Reams: I know late in the thesis you do have this discussion in relation to the virtuality of self, of what is the self in that sense. The phrase that comes to mind for me is that there is some "domain of validity" in which the self as a construct and a way of organizing experience seems to be appropriate and useful. Then you're pointing to a domain of validity that may have a lot to do with wisdom where it may get in the way and be a limiting construct.

Rowson: Yes, I think that's a good way of looking at it. I think you can be completely subject to the self and then you can recognize the self and the various stages beyond that, many of which I have no first person access to. What Varela argues is that he's talking about ethical know-how which is not quite the same as wisdom. But it's wonderful - he talks about certain examples of what it would mean to act with virtue in a given situation.

Varela says the capacity to do that is directly related to the progressive ability to experience this virtuality of self and know it from the inside. To know at some level there's nothing to hold onto. You don't have to be attached to your identity or your desires in a way that prevents you from acting well.

Again, this is a slightly more vernacular popular example. To slightly jump a little bit, in the report that is about to come out [this is referring to a report for the RSA Jonathan has written, and which can be found [here](#)] about spirituality I distinguish between self and soul, and this might be quite useful for this point. When you're at a dance and you're a relatively shy introverted person or just someone who doesn't really want to be too flamboyant in your movements, you often are on the edge of the dance floor and feel a little bit inhibitive and say: "I don't dance. I like to write papers and go to conferences" and so on. But you also know at some level that you'd be a lot better off if you just let go and got on the dance floor.

The qualities of inhibition and self preservation and identity construction that are preventing you from dancing are part of the same type of problems that might prevent you from really seeing what another needs, really hearing and really sensing what's going on in a given situation.

Whereas the part of you that just says "let's go" and says that reputation, that sense of self, that sort of limited conception of who I am doesn't really matter that much, and then

you go dance. You find then after 30 seconds or so of self consciousness you find you're in this much more free liberated state where you can enjoy yourself. It feels truer to who you are as well. It's closer to reality.

Reams: Right. You talk about openness to experience, which is one of the "big five" psychological constructs researchers have found to be empirically valid. This openness to experience has something to do with accessing the more authentic self, but you're also going to make the distinction then between self and soul.

Rowson: Yes, I think this is quite a handy distinction. This is not in the thesis, but helpful here. I spent three years studying philosophy at Oxford in seminar rooms and tutorials with people who are analytically quite fierce and who want to get away from a Cartesian notion of separation of mind and body, and also in my current role as Director of the Social Brain Center at the RSA – a place where intellect and policy are hegemonic and spirit and even emotions are somewhat subordinate.

In any case, there is a kind of professional assumption that consciousness is ultimately material and any notion of the soul is an old fashioned folklore construction we can do without. But actually in recent years I very much changed my mind on that. I think the notion of a soul is absolutely indispensable and it's very valuable and to be spoken of with some pride.

That doesn't, of course, mean there is a little essence that's sort of shiny and pink on the inside close to your heart. It's not soul as product or entity, but soul as the fullest possible context of human experience. Soul gets at what it is to be *an experiencer as such* in the fullest possible context of time and space and life and death and love and loss and so forth.

It's actually something that goes beyond self. You could say that self is about commentary on experience, but soul is closer to experience as such. I know that in Wilberian models and so forth that he goes from self to soul to spirit, but the models are not fresh enough in my mind to link to that. For now, I find that notion of soul captures something quite deep about the playful quality of being alive, the creative quality of being alive. On the other hand I have come to see the self as the identity, the personality and the commentary, which often manifest as barriers to a life fully lived.

Reams: I think that is a very helpful distinction. Of course, it resonates with a lot of stuff I've said and written over the years as well. It leads me to then link this notion of the self to the mind and even to David Bohm's notion that he talks about as thought as a system, where the system of thought constructs an identity, and it's a mental construct, but then it identifies with that. So in that context one of the notes I made here is it seems you're talking about the mind as a servant not a master. And that you try to point to the pathway towards generating wisdom or being able to fall prey to spontaneous wise acts as a need to cultivate certain habits so the mind is more open and amenable to those insights and impulses from soul and not constrained to stay on the edge of the dance floor because the self image doesn't align with being open to that experience.

Rowson: Yes, that's well put and it's more or less how I would put it too. I view self as something virtual but therefore functionally real even if it is not ontologically real. The self is something interesting, even compelling, but also problematic; something I think we need to work towards understanding, integrating and ultimately transcending.

Whereas the soul on the other hand is something I see to be more deeply embraced as part of being fully human. I think there is something about shaking off the self or recognizing that it's a kind of constraint, but we also need it to get through life, so there is something to be said for being at peace with it too – in fact the two things – deeply accepting and fully transcending, may even amount to the same thing in practice.

The soul, on the other hand, is something to be reconnected with and re-experienced because I don't think of the soul as something that reinforces an identity, reinforces a construct of who we are. I think the soul is much more about being fully present for whatever is going on, and that includes other people. Indeed, in this sense moments calling for wise action are not 'set pieces' calling for a formula, but more like a sudden switch from self to soul, in which we free up levels of awareness that allow us to act more judiciously than we could through mere self-expression or self-concern.

Looking back on my thesis, I see more clearly now than I did then that empirically it's very hard to go anywhere with this idea of wise action. You can't really simulate it. You can create scenarios with several people where you're asked to enact a certain difficult complex situation and see what emerges, but that's quite labor intensive and would require a lot of heavy lifting. I say this now because I don't want people to think that wise action is somehow one of these cliff hangers in a Hollywood movie where you say just the right words or do just the right thing to resolve the dramatic tension.

I see it more like an extra-ordinary daily capacity. Sometimes you get home from the office and your head is full of work and you can't really connect with your wife because despite your best abilities your mind is lost in your last email. I think there the challenge of wisdom is somehow to be able to come out of it and be present for the person who needs you. That isn't easy. That is partly a practice related issue in the sense that your mind needs the prior experience of dis-embedding from what it's embedded in. I don't think there's any real short cut to that. There are times when we really can't shake off our immediate experience and connect. But I think various forms of spiritual practice may offer a way out of that.

Reams: Right. So as I'm listening to you describe this I have this image for the average person there is maybe a phenomenological fuzziness and fusion because they'll have a lived experience as soul you could say, and they will have all these kinds of self-images and mental constructs about that experience all kind of mushed together.

Rowson: Yes.

Reams: Earlier I asked you about the process of doing the thesis. Part of that process was that you had this array of stories that you interviewed people around and through that

process I saw people making distinctions about what seems wise and what isn't and why and what perspectives are there on that. The process of being able to differentiate and make distinctions seems to have given you a better sense of this distinction between self and soul which could lead to understanding how do you cultivate practices to enable the self to be more open to soul.

Rowson: Yes, that's in effect how I see it. I think it's also useful to use language that creates some friction against dominant paradigms. So self is an uncontroversial term and it's heavily saturated with perspectives from a whole range of disciplines. But soul is one of these terms that has a different power or different atmosphere around it in terms of the way we talk about it.

Because your hardened scientist materialists wants to say the soul, well we did away with that and we're now working on the mind, and really there is the brain left and even the brain breaks down into neurons and genes, and so forth. So there is this heavy reduction and the soul is right at the beginning of that.

But you also have people like Iain McGilchrist and Nicolas Humphrey and various other scientists who are saying look: even William James if you look at his early writings, speaks about the soul being something we have to do away with. But if you read how he talks of it, it's like very much a "thou doth protest too much" moment. You can really sense that he doesn't want to do away with it (the soul) but feels he has to.

So these people are saying look, it's a very useful concept and if we lose it we lose this perspective of the whole that is how we live at least some of our lives. Some of our richer and deeper moments have this sense of fullness that we can't just disavow. We can't just say those are not 'real'. We need language for those moments that goes beyond emotion and beyond mind and beyond aesthetics and so forth. And the language of the soul, I think, helps to do that.

So it's a brave and somewhat contrarian act that amounts to saying look: I insist on using these terms that are slightly awkward.

Reams: Yes, I've encountered the same because I've used the term soul in publications, and for me the logical distinction is to say all the self characteristics have this transient virtuality to them. So as a ground of being I would prefer soul, which has this sense of eternalness and I'd much rather ground my being in that than in an ephemeral self.

In relation to academic discourse for example I like to reference Mario Beauregard's work, because he's doing neuroscience and talking about how you can interpret if from a non-materialistic view.

Then there is something you talk about in your thesis, that even talking about wisdom is intellectually subversive.

Rowson: Yes, yes, very much so. That said, I sense there are these pockets of resistance in the intellectual world, broadly conceived. At one level there are those who will pay lip service to it but won't really quite know what to do with it. So we've got people like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson writing about the embodied mind and they are asking rhetorically: what is the spirituality of the embodied mind? What is it?

Or people like Jonathan Haidt, maybe, who's saying religious perspectives, particularly as they are manifest in certain implicit ideas of value and the sacred, are experienced as profoundly real, even if the attendant beliefs may not be. But rather than probe these tensions further, they are often presented as afterthoughts. And so in effect you have impressive people saying: I think someone else should look at this in a bit more detail, but if I look at it too much I might undermine my own reputation for scientific impartiality.

Some of course look at it more head on and they have a difficult challenge because there isn't this dominant notion of what intellectual common sense is supposed to be. One of the people I think is best at 'fighting back' is Rupert Sheldrake; I don't know if you've come across his work?

Reams: I had dinner with him at a conference 16 years ago.

Rowson: Okay. He's quite an important voice I think. Someone described him as a fly buzzing around the heads of the dogmatic materialists. He won't go away because he insists on asking the questions in a scientific fashion. Can you explain this with your available data? Where exactly is memory in the brain? How does it make sense?

Reams: Yes, DNA can explain all these things.

Rowson: What exactly is matter? What is your theory of matter? Where exactly is your materialistic consciousness. He's probing people all the time and he's not the only one of course.

Reams: Amit Goswami is another one.

Rowson: Say again please?

Reams: Amit Goswami, the physicist. He's another one who has done that, he's even done the math around it.

Since this is in the area of what you're talking about now, one of my favorite type of questions is; how might you characterize your cosmological framework?

Rowson: Right.

Reams: Because I think that's the lens that's implicit in how you're looking at all this, that enables you to make these distinctions, engage in these practices and processes. So there is something that is enabling all of this.

Rowson: I can speak to that from personal experience now because as I mentioned before the interview started, I just submitted a report that roughly took me two years to complete and involves about 300 or so people and it's about spirituality in the public realm.

One of the things I cited early on, and I think this was a difficult but correct move, was not to make it about fundamental beliefs about how the world is, so I'll come back to what that means for cosmological framework. But what I decided was look; you have broadly three relationships with spirituality. You have the conventional religious spirituality which, of course, includes many different traditions and within those traditions are lots of disagreements and so forth, but they all share a certain perspective of what the world is and what follows from that for our action.

Of course, as I said, there will be big disagreements but they share this idea of there is a metaphysical picture and then an ethical set of ideas that come out of that. Then you have something that's called spiritual but not religious, although I think that's an increasingly problematic term. There is a very broad group of people who don't particularly identify with any religion but don't want to disavow the spiritual, and by the spiritual they often do mean something non-material, whether a being or a certain kind of experience they can't account for. For example, they might think there is an immaterial soul even though they might not be able to hold that under cross examination.

Then finally you have atheistic sectors of spirituality, which is what people like Sam Harris and so forth are beginning to develop, stemming from the recognition that a liberal humanist world view lacks something. It lacks an aspect of experience that connects to us at the level of depth and transcendence and meaning and the sacred, none of which are really going to go away.

I decided that the only way to do justice to the idea of the spiritual was to carry all three of these perspectives and try to hold the tension. I decided that if spirituality was ever going to have a chance to be recognized as a valid subject of shared public concern, everybody had to have at least some stake in it. Now that makes it difficult because you have some people saying look, the spiritual is meaningless unless you have a view of something immaterial, a divine presence or purpose or providence that shapes the world. Others will say look, I don't really want to be on the same page as people who think we all ought to go back to church even if we don't believe in God, and so on.

So there is a lot of tension in that approach, but I decided that actually you can unpack a view of the spiritual that includes all these things and I tried to do that. I mention that now and the report will explain how I went about that, but what I want to share is the kinds of reactions I've had to that.

In a speech about the report I gave recently [which you can find [here](#)] I distinguished between three broad reactions and I based them on the facial expressions people give me when I start talking about the spiritual. So should I go on about this?

Reams: Yes.

Rowson: Good. The first reaction is from what I call the spiritual swingers. By that I mean people who look at you when you mention the spiritual, they look at you eagerly and excitedly, feeling that you're one of them and on their turf and we should speak more about this. But they don't typically distinguish between different kinds of spiritual engagement. So for them going to a three month Vipassana Retreat is a-piece with a quick visit to the Tarot reader or buying a new age self-help book. There isn't really any sense of discrimination about what the spiritual refers to. So I call them the spiritual swingers, and they are very keen for this discussion to take place. That's not to disparage them and it's not as though they couldn't discriminate, it's just at the moment in many cases they're not doing that.

The second group I call the religious diplomats. They look at you warmly and welcomingly but with a slight hint of distrust. Imagine people who are maybe on the liberal side of Christianity, or maybe secular Buddhists, and relatively secularized people in the Vedantic tradition who are still practicing in various ways. They will think you're onto something very important and yes it's actually a big part of public life but they'll distrust it because they don't really see how it works outside of a tradition or institutional context with particular doctrines or practices. So they are keen to see where you can get to, but don't seem to really believe in it at some level. I call them religious diplomats because they're encouraging but you also sense that they have an agenda of their own which is to preserve the integrity of their own traditions.

Finally you have what I call the intellectual assassins, and they're the hardest to face. They look at you with a kind of disgust and disdain. They look at you as if, what the hell are you talking about? This spirituality is nebulous nonsense and you know it. You went to Oxford for God's sake, why are you talking about the spiritual? These people are actually quite hard to deal with.

I realized after a while, of course, that these three constructs are projections and that I have them all in my psyche. They're all different ways in which I wrestle with what it is to speak of the spiritual. On the one hand I'm quite skeptical and so I'm not at ease with a spiritual free-for-all, an "anything goes" approach. On the other hand I can clearly see this is a big part of my life and I feel as though it needs to be a bigger part of the world's conversation, at least in advanced democracies, advanced capitalist or late capitalist or post capitalist societies.

So I see this very complex picture emerging where, within the sociology of religion they're realizing that the secularization narrative hasn't really happened. It's just not true that the triumph of reason and death of God has really happened. Instead you have this

confused incipient world of different beliefs and different perspectives that hasn't yet taken real shape in any sort of crystallized form, and may never do.

One the one hand that's a bit dizzying and troubling and it makes sense that people would want to go back to religion in that context. On the other hand you have the sense that if only we could keep the conversation going we might find something that works or begins to make sense for those who feel they could never 'go back' to religion, no matter how much it reforms.

Reams: Lots of the things there and I'm just making some notes to hold some of them. One is how I hear some of what you're saying is that some people are struggling to come to what I would call a trans-rational rather than a pre-rational view of spirituality.

Rowson: Yes that's right.

Reams: Some of the swingers find it easy to be with the pre-rational because they don't want to get bogged down in having to do the heavy labor or make rigorous distinctions to clarify things. So anything is good as long as it isn't that rational view. The ones who are really within the rational view are like the diplomats. I would surmise them to be saying yes that's all nice, we know there's something more there, but it needs to be rooted in some kind of rational explanation.

Rowson: Yes.

Reams: And the assassins, well that's a whole other matter. But would there be...

Rowson: They are important because they are the high priests of the academy and also the high priests of much of policy making. I think the intellectual assassin mindset, which in effect says defend your terms and measure your measurables and then assess your impact. That's the kind of mentality a lot of these people have, at least in their professional role, and I call them assassins because they're quite skilled. It's not necessarily that they don't sense here's something going on. But whether because they're defensive or uncomfortable with the language that they think of as pre-rational, they're the biggest challenge in some ways.

Reams: Right, and the picture I have from what you're saying, which is they may have some phenomenological experience or practice or connection to something, but the mind is more of a master than a servant and so the intellectual need to put things in the frames that it can relate to drives it more.

Rowson: True.

Reams: So a couple of questions. One is; is there another category other than those three reactions that you would like to encounter?

Rowson: Yes. It's funny I didn't put this into the speech but I thought about it. I think the appropriate response is a mixture of all three of these. So you want the critical discrimination of the intellectual assassin, you want the deep historical and institutional understanding of the religious diplomats and you want the kind of radical openness to experience of the spiritual swingers.

The question is what do you get when those three, when they aren't just thrown in and sort of mixed together but somehow optimally connected so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I don't know what the term would be for that kind of person but...

Reams: Well I think Kegan's notion of being able to...

Rowson: Something approaching wisdom might be it.

Reams: Yes. Having a self-transforming mind would enable you to take on the characteristics of those different perspectives, views and attitudes as appropriate but not identify with them.

Rowson: Yes exactly. I think maybe the point is just that. It's funny with Kegan and Wilber, for me it's like they're not second nature to me to that extent. I'm often reminded of them and see – of that perspective again - and oh yes, that's how it fits.

In this case, I wasn't thinking developmentally, but perhaps the spiritual swinger might be more Kegan's stage two or three but the other two are probably a bit more stage four in my view of them. But yes you're right, probably what you need is something more stage five like or beyond that in that sense is worth working towards.

Reams: Right. I think the distinction I would pull us back to is that is something you're looking for as a sense of character or way of being that has enough of a type of soul presence to manage the self and the embodied reactivity that you pointed to as some of the issues that keep us from making this progress on the path towards wisdom.

Rowson: Yes, and for me the picture is always complicated by certain things. If I have weaknesses as a thinker - and I certainly do! - one of the main ones is knowing what is out and what is in scope. I tend not to draw boundaries very well. I'm interested to think about the social and political context of any given personal pathway.

We live in a time of a fairly unstable economy and technological proliferation, potential ecological collapse, all are arguably already underway. You have all these things in the back of your mind, and then for me it doesn't make sense to speak of personal cultivation without some awareness of those situational factors that provide the context for it. That's difficult because it's already complicated and it gets even more complicated when you bring that in.

Reams: Right, which gets us back to the question around cosmological framework.

Rowson: Yes. My own cosmological framework would be, well my biggest formative experience as a person is playing chess professionally for many years. I became a Grandmaster and was the British Chess Champion and it was a huge part of my life. I wrote three books about the game. I wondered recently what exactly transferred from that main specific expertise.

I didn't put this in the spirituality report but I did write it at one point and I realized there are three main things. One of main ones relates to the fact that in chess we often use this expression, "keep the tension". There are moments where you can clarify the situation, for instance you might make a pawn exchange or a piece exchange or take some tension out of the position, something that's unresolved and you resolve it.

Actually, a lot of chess skills is marked by the capacity (a) not to do that and (b) to handle the tension well, because the argument is that the more complex your grasp of the position, the stronger you are, the more the tension will work in your favor because you'll be able to read all the different ways in which the tension might resolve itself and there are more potential pitfalls for your opponent, whereas you can manage them better. So the idea of keeping the tension is quite important to me.

In terms of my cosmological framework, chess also gave me the very strong inclination to inquire into what the other side is thinking. That's the reason I bring in the intellectual assassin. Some of my friends who are more into spirituality say: "You're always complicating it. Why are you always trying to convince people? Just do your own thing and enjoy it."

For me it's very important to sort of lock horns if you like with the important perspective and see what comes out of that. So my cosmological framework includes quite a big sense of pluralism and dealing with the other side and dealing with the shadow and so forth.

Finally, there is a third main thing I got from chess which was a suspicion of grand strategy. I know from chess deep down that anything that suggests if you do A and then B and C, D, E, then F will follow tends to come unstuck around B or C on a good day. So those three things together would mean any framework has to have a huge amount of scope for how we deal with the unresolved and holding spaces for conflict, a sort of deep respect for opposing views, a deep understanding that there will never be an overarching picture that will tell everyone what to do. There has to be room for conflict and chaos.

So my framework would have to have plenty of space for the tension being held and opponents being respected and a kind of view of progress that was sufficiently nuanced and tentative that you could actually believe in it.

Reams: So all that, and there may be more, but I want to stop for a minute. Some of the notes I made when looking at your thesis included a number of things about the virtuality of the self and the path to wisdom. I got this feeling for a sense of detachment or non-attachment at the heart of enabling all these things. And even as you describe this

process, and you describe it a little bit in your thesis, of what was interesting for you in playing chess, it was observing how your mind would relate to the very things you were just talking about now. That, to me, requires a certain kind of non-attachment to the mind and its processes to be able to witness it.

Rowson: Yes. I think I've had that from a relatively young age – probably mostly because of chess, but perhaps also from being a type-one diabetic since I was six; you are just obliged to be a bit more experientially self-conscious. But at the same time I don't think that is it in and of itself a good thing! You can use that for good or ill.

What I'm reminded of by the mention of the detachment is the Zen teaching story about the different stages of the ox. I don't know if you know the one I mean but broadly the first one is about discovering the ox, the second is seeing it and you begin to wrestle with it and you're thrown off it and get back on it and so forth. As I remember the story it resolves itself by the man and ox being separate and then the man is alone and then the penultimate stage of this spiritual journey involves wrestling with the ox which, of course, represents the ego and that tells the story of seeing it in one's experience, beginning to wrestle with it, beginning to see how powerful it is and slowly getting some control over it.

The final one is called 'Entering the Marketplace with Open Arms'. That is about coming back into the fold. So on the one hand yes you detach, have to go through this struggle, this wrestling match with your inner forces and see them and in some sense and overpower them and in some sense make peace with them. But having done that it's not as though that's the battle. That's only the preview to the battle. The real difficult work is when you reengage with other people and you come to try and help others in their own way and that's a long journey, that's not something that a meditative vision does for you.

Reams: No, and I want to make a distinction because I recognize that the way you're using the term here or unpacking it is something I encounter a lot and so I want to come back to that. Also what you're describing also is Joseph Campbell's notion of the heroes' journey, you have to go out and slay the dragon but then you have to come back, and how do you bring what you've gained from that experience back to the community?

Rowson: Yes, that's part of it and we're in this magical space, and we talked about this but since we're on this, I'm reminded of Frodo in Lord of the Rings actually. What I find as one of the truest, beautiful parts of that story in that book and film is the idea that Frodo couldn't really stay in the Shire. The idea that he'd been through too much, he'd too been bruised and changed by it fundamentally, he couldn't carry on being a Hobbit in the Shire.

I think there is something in that too. If you have any Scottish readers there is a famous slightly nationalistic song called Caledonia and there is a line in there: "Lost the friends I needed losing; found others on the way." I think there is something to that as well. There is a lot of loss on a spiritual journey it's not all just about gain. It's about pain and the severing of some cherished attachments.

Reams: Yes very much. So in that sense the severing of attachments or I think often of identifications that we in a way become disillusioned, in that we lose some of our illusions about our self and others. At the same time, and that's why I say detachment or non-attachment, for me there is an implicit connotation that detachment is in no way disengaging from the world. It is about being fully present in the world and yet at the same time not had by it, not lost in it.

Rowson: Yes, that's helpful. I think you're right. It's one of the terms that has certain implicit meanings that aren't altogether helpful. To detach in a way is to reengage rather than be lost.

Reams: I think this comes back to your distinction between self and soul. Where is the point of detachment? What is it we are detaching from? It may be that it's from this virtuality of self if we're not identifying with it as the ground of our being, it allows us a freedom.

There was a line in your thesis from Watzlawick that you cite, that I noted very strongly that he talked about taking total responsibility for creating our own world, but that at the same time this gave us total freedom.

Rowson: Yes, which is slightly terrifying. I have probably moved away from that now. I think my thinking in the last few years, of having been married and having a child, I have a much stronger felt sense of interdependence than I think I had at the time I wrote the thesis. You know, just being a functional 21st century grown up – staying sane, not to mention flourishing, is pretty exacting.

So the idea that we can ever have that degree of control over our own reality I think, well, it's not entirely untrue but you have to really find your inner power. One of the best books I've read in the last few years if I'm fully honest is a book about archetypes of the mature masculine psyche. It's a Jungian book, but I found it very helpful, called *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover*. It's about how these different types of undercurrents of our life need to be brought to fruition to function properly as a man.

There are, of course, female and feminine parallels all along I'm pretty sure, but it made sense to me because at some point when I was struggling I realized that I had more or less outsourced all these archetypes to other people and I had to reassimilate them in my own way.

So things like just taking ownership of difficult domestic decisions that you might prefer to defer or outsource, that would be King-like energy, or even getting the bills paid, making sure you fix the things that get broken in the home, and perhaps most importantly demarcating what is really in your 'kingdom' and what isn't i.e. What matters and what doesn't.

Then warrior energy is, broadly, what are you fighting for? What really matters and what doesn't? Lover energy is getting in touch with the soul like qualities of sensuality and playfulness. And there is a magician energy that is full of insight and knowledge and

specialist understanding. That's always been my delight, but also my problem. To live a balanced life you shouldn't let the magician energy run riot. It's about having a mature conception of it.

I mention all that now because I think once you bring in other people – colleagues, friends, children, parents, spouses- into the equation, it's extremely exacting to actually 'create your own world'. You have to discover whatever personal power of control or perspective that you can, and that requires maturation, quite rapid maturation sometimes, but it's a maturation that can only come about through adapting to the worlds of other people; it really can't come about in isolation.

Reams: Yes. There is something about this that for me always bumps into some of the connotations or implications of cosmological framework, because people say it's all well and good to be the person responsible for creating your world until you end up in certain circumstances where as you say you're suddenly in this much more interdependent dynamic and you see why you're not in control of these things, but how are you going to be responsible for them and have the freedom that comes from that.

In this case, I like to reference for instance, James Hillman in the Soul's Code about going back to Plato and the Myth of Er and the notion that we don't come into this world as blank slates. That genetic nature and nurturing of our environment together cannot explain all of our character and being in the world. There is something prior to that that comes in and in that sense can bring in with it some sense of fate or destiny that gives us circumstances that we wonder, where did we create this from? And yet in a deeper more profound sense we have created it before we came here.

Rowson: Right. Well this is an interesting one and when I come back to keeping the tension on the spiritual, this is a good case in point because part of me very much wants to go with you on that and say yes that's true to experience and coheres with a lot of things I believe and do. Another part of me here is the rational skeptic saying, yes certainly there is not a blank slate, there is an evolutionary endowment including a certain epigenetic process whereby culture and genes and so forth give rise to certain preconditions.

I forget who it was but I think it was Jonathan Haidt who said that "innate does not mean fixed and determined. It means organized prior to experience."

Reams: Okay.

Rowson: I think that's quite a useful expression. Innate means organized prior to experience. In other words, there is a default setting that isn't trivial and is quite important. The default setting shapes what follows in important ways. The question is, does that default setting include archetypes in the Jungian sense? Does it include some in built sense of the hero's quest in Campbell's sense? I don't really know the answer to that but I think it *could* but I am far from certain that it does.

Reams: Right. So as I listen to that response I also would want to refer back to this distinction between self and soul and is it possible that some of these things you're describing are relating more to the concept of self and less to the presence of soul as a kind of ongoing learning entity?

Rowson: Well it's possible. I mean, I wonder. Part of me wants to find the courage to say yes I believe we have something very much resembling a soul. It may not be ontologically material in the same way the body and skeleton are but it's nonetheless real and when we're born there is something like an individual soul, and it is somehow part of a greater world soul; a part of me really thinks that and really wants to go with that. But I can't go all the way there. There's another part of me that is pulling back and pressing the brakes and saying: Look, the soul may be an emergent property and come about through the experience of being in the world, and observing other people and going through certain experiences. It may not be there as such when you're born. On the other hand I don't know what that would mean, or how it could be exactly.

That book that I mentioned about the archetypes, there is something deeply real about that. When I came across this it wasn't just intellectually satisfying, it was emotionally validating and made me feel yes, this is true. At some level, fundamentally to function fully and feel well and feel functional in society, I need to get back in touch with these aspects of my psyche that I've forsaken.

Reams: Right.

Rowson: These aspects of my psyche, they are at the soul level, you're right, they're not really self related, they are more about the journey and quest and the archetypes. I guess I would say I'm with you on that, but a part of me is reluctant to close the door on that and wants to keep some air for the skeptic to breathe.

Reams: But what I hear in that is you applying what you described as your learning about how to be in chess, to hold the tension. That there is clearly a tension there for you and that becomes a living question. So you don't want to bring closure on it because that takes away the openness to learning and growth and letting that tension as you quote Kegan and Lahey, "let the problem solve you rather than you solve it."

Rowson: Yes, I had forgotten that expression. I remember enjoying that. So yes, the challenge is, and this is keeping it real again, that disposition makes you quite difficult to live with! It might be intellectually interesting and it might even be true to how we should think at some level about certain things. But people you're managing at work, or family at home often want a resolute decision, and quickly. And saying let's keep it open and let's not resolve the tension is by no means always welcome. People in your life want to know the big fundamental existential decisions and you're like, well, why didn't the problem solve me? I'm not sure that kind of perspective is always helpful.

Yes, I guess I'm doing it again. I'm keeping the tension again, but that does seem to be quite a big factor in how I approach things. I hope that if we speak again in five years I

may have somehow developed a somewhat less problematic relationship to this issue. At the moment it doesn't particularly feel like a strength; it feels more like a feature that permits certain things, but with certain problems.

Reams: I made a note before this interview about where you talk about the significance of Varela's claim of the need to have first person experience of the virtuality of self.

Rowson: Yes.

Reams: The tension that I hear you describing in your thesis and talk about now is that when there is not a conscious awareness of that kind of experience in a clear way, then the perceptual means that you have to encounter that question generates a lot of this tension. It's like a Zen koan and its generating tremendous tension. I could say for myself, from my own experience, having had a really profound experience of that virtuality of the self, I see how it has worked on me for 23 years now, that it has enabled me to relate to that dichotomy in a way with much less tension.

Rowson: Yes, okay, good to hear that. I guess I have a sense within myself that there is a great deal of development still to go. In some of my better moments in the last few weeks and months I have been performing simple human acts well. So being on time, feeding my son well and mindfully, making sure I was available for my wife, speaking well to colleagues and making sure I'm listening. Simple, important things.

Such things actually require presence and require me to get out of my typical mindset. Those achievements have been quite satisfying because I sense that feeling of self-control and inner growth and just the simple act of being present and how difficult it is in daily life is quite a significant. When you get it, you think if I can be like this more of the time then I can't really ask for more. Just to enjoy those simple moments of living more fully and deeply because you're present to them.

Reams: Right. This goes back to something you were writing about in your thesis, that one of the challenges of, for instance, defining wisdom is that most of the definitions do not have a good path towards becoming wiser built into them. In that sense it's actually unwise to try and define wisdom. What I hear you describing now is a sense of an actual lived path towards becoming wiser.

Rowson: Yes, I think you put it quite well there. There is a wonderful essay by, I think, Chandler & Holiday in one of the Sternberg wisdom collections where they write about whatever wisdom is, it shouldn't be 'a charred fragment from our psychometric past'. They were recognizing that the wish to measure and define might be antithetical to the qualities we're trying to bring to bear.

By contrast, I think within religious traditions they actually have pathways towards wisdom, but it's just that many aspects of our culture have become a bit wary of conventional religion and we often don't see them as such. For example, the Buddhist eightfold path is the quintessence of a pathway towards becoming wiser. But why don't

we see that? Well for some it doesn't feel like their thing. Some are put off by the fact that it's explicitly religious or there is too much of a commitment to one pathway. But they have presented both a story of how things are and a story of how we have to be to live better and more fully. There are similar things in other religions as well.

Reams: But I'm reminded of a moment where one of my colleagues at Integral Review, Bonnie Roy and I were at the Metanexus Conference back in 2007 and there was a panel that Marty Seligman was chairing. They had top scholars from the Jewish tradition, the Christian tradition and the Islamic tradition and they were all going on at length about all these things. Bonnie got up there and asked, so what does your theology have to say about cultivating love?

Rowson: Right.

Reams: And they all sat there and said nothing. They really didn't have a response to that.

Rowson: That's sad to hear. In the report that is about to come out we speak about four main reference points for our discussion of spirituality that keeps these three perspectives on board, that appeases the intellectual assassins and placates the religious diplomats and also helps the spiritual swingers to find something.

Love is the first of those, death is the second and then self and soul are the third and fourth. I feel these four things have to be at the center of the conversation because they seem to me to be the most fundamental. On love, I think, any sort of spiritual perspective that doesn't have a story to tell about love is fundamentally lacking. And to be fair, Christianity has love right at heart of things, which gives me a weird kind of cultural pride.

Reams: I think the challenge was this was a group of theologians.

Rowson: Right. So the thing is there is an experience of love that many of us know, most of us I guess, which involves a kind of welling up on the inside, but it's unlike anything else; and it is so clearly true and real at some fundamental level and is a sign of what we care about and should be living for, but it comes and goes so infrequently that we don't always recognize it as being the sign of how we should live.

I think speaking the language of love and recognizing that we're going to die, realizing that the self is somewhat problematic and something to be worked through and to some degree overcome and then reconnecting with the soul. For me this is the sort of broad tapestry of what the new spirituality might look like.

Reams: That brings me to a question, as we have started out talking about wisdom and wisdom related knowledge to wise acts and all this, it's clear that somehow in the mix of this is a lot of spirituality.

Rowson: I think so. When I wrote the thesis I recognized that, but didn't make too much of it. Now I would probably push that a bit harder. I think like soul, spirituality is a phenomenon, also a term we should be a bit more fortified by using. I think there are lots of people who never come across the term or don't think of themselves as spiritual who might nonetheless be wise. But I don't think that matters too much. I think they are pointing to similar things. They're pointing away from our place and by that I mean a kind of status and our personality and identity and back towards our ground; and by that I mean our fragility, our pending death, our relationships that matter deeply to us, our experiences of love in our life.

So this distinction between ground and place, I think for people who are wiser they have a much stronger sense of the ground and a much better perspective on their place. They are less caught up on what it is to get on in the world and more fully attuned to what it means to be in the world.

So for me the two are quite closely linked. There are certain distinctions of course, and you can get wise managers and the term wisdom is a little bit promiscuous like that - it goes everywhere. Spirituality is a little bit more specific probably.

Reams: Yes. Where that question would lead into is, is there any sense of where this is heading? I know you have the RSA project and I remember being at one of the events, and you have the report coming out now. Is there a sense of where you might want to go with this work in the future?

Rowson: We'll see when and how and in what institutional capacity, but there are a few things going on. In addition to the spirituality work I spent a year in 2013 thinking about climate change from not a particularly spiritual perspective. I was looking at economic models and scientific projections and various social movements and so forth. And in my other work I sometimes think about inequality and educational reform and various other practical policy things.

For me the question at the moment is, how do you get better at bringing these things together? I am becoming a much comfortable using this kind of language more freely and confidently because I think there is a large but mostly latent appetite for it. We shouldn't shy away from words that matter to us and that point towards things that are important. For me it's not hiding away and retreating from my own personal development, it's very much about helping others to articulate what they already feel about these things.

Because whenever I've spoken about for example, the spiritual roots of climate change, people are quite attentive. My experience is that they 'get it' and at some intuitive level they know that the major problems we face are at some fundamental level 'spiritual'.

So the challenge is to enrich our conceptions spiritually enough so that it has a sort of tractable and comprehensible quality. But also to realize that it's not enough to map it out. One has to live it to some extent too. The challenge for me is to do that while

simultaneously making sense of big complex political issues. So really it's how do you link the spiritual and the political in a way that doesn't drive you insane.

Reams: And if you can navigate that, you'll definitely be on the path of wisdom.

Rowson: I only can hope, but it remains to be seen!

Reams: Thanks very much for your time today Jonathan.

Rowson: Pleasure, thanks a lot.