

ORGANISMIC WISDOM:  
EXPLORING OUR INNATE TENDENCY TOWARDS HEALTH, GROWTH  
AND RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

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There is an active process within the organic realm that seeks and maintains health, growth, and the continuation of life, a process I refer to as the *organic process*. I define *organismic wisdom* as our subjective experience of this process. The purpose of this project is to explore how our relationship with the organic process directly impacts our mental and spiritual health. I compare positivistic science's inquiries into the organic process with the inquiries of several philosophical and spiritual traditions, and I formulate a model that may allow us to see these various worldviews as merely different lenses through which we view the same process. I then apply the implications of this model to a personal crisis I went through several years ago and then discuss the impact these implications may have on our understanding of what causes mental dysfunction and how those experiencing it may best be supported.

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## Introduction

Ron Kurtz (1990), developer of Hakomi psychotherapy, defined *organicity* as “the process dynamics of self-organization—the internally directed creation, maintenance and evolution of living systems” (p. 25). Carl Rogers (1978) defined the *formative tendency* as

. . . an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater complexity, greater interrelatedness . . . from a single-cell origin to complex organic functioning, to knowing and sensing below the level of consciousness, to a conscious awareness of the organism and the external world to a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including mankind. (p. 26)

Other philosophers and traditions have pointed to this same drive/process in different ways using different terminology. In this paper, for the sake of clarity, I will refer to it simply as *organismic wisdom*.

Organismic wisdom is so common that we see signs of it everywhere we look, and yet the source remains mysterious and elusive. Embryos form, wounds heal, damaged ecosystems return to a climax state. Machines break and need to be fixed; living beings and living systems, on the other hand, *heal*, and the act of healing can only come from within the living being or system itself. A doctor can set a bone, but then he or she must get out of the way and allow the individual organism the freedom to do the actual healing.

*Positivist science*, what is often mistakenly referred to simply as “science,” has made serious attempts to understand organismic wisdom. Members of this pursuit have debated over definitions of “life”; have created theoretical models in attempts to explain the birth and fate of our universe; have formulated links between the evolution of the universe and the evolution of what we call life; and have attempted to define and measure

various mechanisms related to organismic wisdom (e.g., fertilization, mitosis, immune systems, negative entropy, etc.). Ultimately, however, due to the limitations of positivistic science, all this field has really been able to say about these various mechanisms is that they are correlations or perhaps manifestations of this force rather than being the ultimate causative agents. It is quite possible that discussion of the ultimate source of this force will have to remain in the realms of philosophy, mysticism, and spiritual traditions.

In the following pages, I explore humankind's attempts to understand organismic wisdom. I begin the journey by exploring some of the ways the field of positivistic science has attempted to tackle this issue, exploring both the powerful insights and the serious limitations of this worldview. I then look at how some philosophical and spiritual perspectives have attempted to address this issue, a look that will be all too brief given the limited scope of this paper and the vastness of this field. I then attempt to apply some of the concepts I have derived from this exploration to an actual crisis I went through a number of years ago. By looking more deeply into my own process of struggling to connect with the organismic wisdom within my being, I hope to take what can often be a very abstract concept and shed some light on how it manifests in the "real world." In the final section of this paper, I very briefly discuss the implications such an exploration may have on our understanding of mental dysfunction, looking specifically at what may cause mental dysfunction and how those experiencing it may best be supported.

**Part 1:**  
**The Organic Process—Positivistic Science’s Explorations of Organismic Wisdom**

I begin this exploration into organismic wisdom by exploring some of the attempts to understand it that have been made within the field of positivistic science. By using the word *positivistic* in this context, my intention is to emphasize the fact that what most of us typically think of as “science” is actually only one type of science, and just one worldview of many. One of the fundamental assumptions of this worldview is that there is a fixed, objective reality that is completely independent from those who observe it. (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2007). Another assumption based directly upon this one is that because of the ultimately objective nature of reality, the only valid method for determining what is “true” is the use of empirically based, neutral observations of events (i.e., the scientific method and quantitative analysis). Spiritual experiences, metaphysics, and philosophy are not seen as valid means to determine “truth”; and of these approaches, philosophy is seen as the only one with any potential validity, though it is valid only as a means to determine whether something is “scientific” or not. Positivistic science carries with it quite openly the highly biased assumption that its validity is self-evident, requiring no justification, philosophical or otherwise (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). When we consider the awesome technological progress that has been achieved through scientific means, there can be no doubt of the potential power this worldview (with its accompanying methods) has for manipulating the world. However, as will become apparent, positivistic science has severe limitations when it comes to understanding the most fundamental nature of our universe, a limitation that has ironically been revealed by its own methods.

When exploring organismic wisdom within the worldview of positivistic science, I believe that *organic process* is a more appropriate term. *Wisdom*, typically referring to

qualities such as judgment, experience and intuition, is by definition subjective, and, because positivistic science gives little importance to subjective phenomena, it does not provide a way to explore the concept of wisdom. This limitation itself, then, reveals a much more general limitation of positivistic science, something I discuss later.

Positivistic science has made many valuable contributions to the exploration of this topic, however; and for now, I will focus on these. In particular, I find that two fundamental dichotomies emerge from the evidence gathered by these methods—the expansion/contraction dichotomy and the unity/duality dichotomy—concepts that I think are particularly relevant to the discussion of the organic process.

### ***The Birth of the Expansion/Contraction Dichotomy***

In exploring positivistic science's attempt to understand the organic process, it makes some sense to start at the beginning. Though we apparently have no way of knowing how many universes have existed prior to ours or how many exist now, we do have a lot of evidence that hints at the likely beginning of the universe we live in now.

In 1936, Edwin Hubble (1899-1953) discovered that all observable galaxies were moving away from us at a rate proportional to their distance. The only logical conclusion that anyone has been able to come up with for this is that the universe is expanding. Taking this reasoning one step further, we have arrived at the widely accepted *Big Bang* Theory. Though the details of the Big Bang Theory are debatable, the general concept of the theory is fairly simple: Everything that exists today in the known universe—space, time, matter, and energy—was once contained within a single point, infinitely small and infinitely dense, known as a singularity (Sawyer, 1999). Suddenly, and for an unknown reason, this singularity began to expand at an unimaginable rate—a rate much faster than

the speed of light—and to evolve into the universe we observe today. After just one second, it is calculated that the universe had expanded to a radius of 20 light-years. For the first 10,000 years or so, the universe was simply “a dense sea of radiation” (“Worlds . . . Without End,” 2000, p. 60) and had characteristics very similar to a star, though it was still expanding and thinning very rapidly. At this point, the force of gravity became apparent, and some areas began to condense more than others. What was once a nearly uniform sea of radiation was beginning to separate and form the first clumps, which would later condense to form matter and eventually (after about another half billion years) become the first galaxies. The emptying spaces between these clumps would become what we now observe as empty space. In essence, then, leaving aside the unknown cause of the initial burst of the original singularity, the formation of the universe we know today came about because of the interplay between two categories of forces: contraction and expansion.

In physics, four *fundamental forces* (also known as *fundamental interactions*) have been identified, the properties of which can be described as either contractive (or attractive), expansive (or repulsive), or some combination thereof (Bereznoy, 2005). *Gravity*, although considered the weakest of the four forces, is the strongest force on the cosmic level. It has an infinite range and is the only force that acts universally on all matter; therefore, it is the primary force affecting the movement of massive bodies (which have no net electrical charge and so receive little effect from the other forces), acting in a purely contractive way. *Electromagnetism* is the force that acts between electrically charged particles, therefore contributing to both contraction and expansion (depending on the polarity of the charges of the particles). It holds electrons to nuclei, is

the primary force in molecular bonding, and is responsible for the vast majority of phenomena we experience in day-to-day life (Berezhtoy). The *strong nuclear force*, the strongest of all four of the fundamental forces, appears to play only a contractive role, holding quarks and gluons together to form protons and neutrons and holding protons and neutrons together to form atomic nuclei. Finally, the *weak nuclear force* appears to play primarily an expansive role, being most known for its role in *beta decay*—a type of radioactive decay in which neutrons are converted to protons and vice versa (Berezhtoy). Many physicists are optimistic that we will someday develop a theory that will show that all of these forces (as well as matter) are merely different manifestations of one common unified field, an idea often referred to as the *theory of everything* (Greene, 2003). Perhaps the most well-known attempt at this is *string theory* (Greene). By demonstrating that all manifestations have arisen from one common unified field, such a theory would lend very strong support to the already strongly supported Big Bang theory.

As the two forces of contraction and expansion have continued to wrestle and dance with each other during the formation of our universe, more and more complex organizational systems began to form. First came individual galaxies, and with further expansion and contraction came individual stars. The first stars were comprised primarily of simple hydrogen atoms—manifestations of the dynamic dance between the simplest positively charged particle (a proton) and the simplest negatively charged particle (an electron; Hawking, 2005). With time and the process of fusion, more and more complex atoms—those consisting of greater and greater numbers of protons, electrons, and neutrons—came into being in the larger stars. With still more time, an iron core may accumulate within the center of the larger stars and grow until it exceeds a maximum

sustainable mass. If a star reaches this point, it will collapse and subsequently explode in what are perhaps the most creative and destructive events in the universe—supernovas (Hawking). In a very real sense, then, stars that perish in this way succumb to the force of expansion; and, interestingly, some stars with a large enough mass and other necessary properties may eventually succumb to the force of contraction, becoming *singularities*, or what are often referred to as *black holes* (Hawking).

The stars that perish in a fiery supernova have lived a long life, having typically reached the level of generating very complex atoms. Therefore, the contents that they spew many light years across space are comprised of all of the relatively stable elements that we have documented in the periodic table of the chemical elements (Hawking, 2005). The forces of expansion and contraction then continue to act on these “clouds” of elements known as nebulae, and, with time, many of them contract to form planets (Hawking). Finally, as the forces of contraction and expansion continue to dance and wrestle within and on the surface of these planets, when just the right balance of conditions come together, living organisms and living systems come into being. From this perspective, then, it can be argued that the entire physical universe as we know it—from black holes to supernovae, and from subatomic particles to complex life forms that have the capacity to contemplate their own existence—is the result of one fundamental dichotomy: that between contraction and expansion.

### ***Unity vs. Duality—A Second Overarching Dichotomy?***

In what is often referred to as the physical realm (the realm consisting of time, space, matter, and energy—all that we can quantify), the expansion/contraction dichotomy is relatively apparent; but there is evidence that another overarching

dichotomy is at play in the universe—that between the drive towards duality and the drive towards unity. By duality, I am referring to the expansion/contraction dichotomy itself with the entire resulting physical realm; and, by unity, I am referring to the realm of unity that may have existed previously and perhaps continues to exist beneath this realm of duality—what has sometimes been referred to in spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism and Vedanta as the “ground of all being” (Goswami, 2001, p. 172) from which duality has sprung and perhaps continues to spring.

There is scientific evidence that both of these drives—the drive towards duality and the drive towards unity—are very much alive and at play in the universe today. Cosmically, we see evidence that the universe as a whole continues to expand while galaxies continue to contract into black holes, revealing an ongoing drive towards duality. On the organismic level, we see more and more complex organisms continue to develop with ever higher levels of self-awareness and an apparently increasing capacity for unitive experiences, revealing an ongoing drive towards unity.

### ***The Drive Towards Duality***

***The arrow of time.*** The *arrow of time*, a term coined by British astrophysicist Arthur Heddington in 1927 (“Arrow of Time,” n.d.), is one of the fundamental concepts in physics. In simplest terms, it states that all closed systems, including presumably our universe, tend towards increasing disorder. On the microscopic level, physical processes seem to be *time symmetrical* (i.e., occurring equally forward or backwards), while on a macroscopic level (i.e., observable with the naked eye), this is not the case, something that is readily evident (“Arrow of Time”). For example, if we poured two different-colored dyes into a bucket of water, we would expect them to naturally mix

over time; however, if we came across the same bucket with two dyes already mixed within it, we would be quite shocked to see the two dyes spontaneously separating themselves apart from each other. Or, to give another example, we are not surprised to see a wine glass fall from our hand and shatter on the floor; however, if we saw a pile of broken glass and spilled wine spontaneously come together and form a seamless wine glass full of wine and rise up to land gently in our hand, we would certainly wonder what else was in that wine! The arrow of time is something most of us take completely for granted, yet it continues to be somewhat of a mystery in the field of physics.

Through a somewhat complex discussion involving thermodynamic principles, Eddington was able to arrive at a theory that proposes that the arrow of time is purely a function of *entropy*. *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* defines entropy as

. . . a measure of the unavailable energy in a closed thermodynamic system that is also usually considered to be a measure of the system's disorder, that is a property of the system's state, and that varies directly with any reversible change in heat in the system and inversely with the temperature of the system. ("Entropy," 2009)

As can be seen by the broad number of concepts contained within its definition, entropy is a complex concept, and a full discussion of it falls outside the scope of this paper.

However, to sum it up in the simplest terms that are appropriate for this discussion, we can think of entropy as both a measure of disorder and a measure of the unavailability of energy (two factors which are highly correlated with each other; "Arrow of Time," n.d.).

The *second law of thermodynamics*, one of four fundamental laws within the field of thermodynamics, states that in an isolated system, entropy will only increase, and never decrease, with time ("Arrow of Time"). Considering that entropy is essentially a measure of disorder, what this second law implies is that disorder is not time symmetrical but is time *asymmetrical*. In a closed system, such as our universe, this law states that disorder

will continue to increase, and can never decrease. In subsystems, it is possible for order to increase (such as in the development of life, as will be discussed later), but, according to this law, the net entropy in the universe or any other closed system must continue increasing.

***The fate of the universe.*** Both expansion and contraction have continued to work on the universe, increasing the level of duality in the universe ever since the first moment of the Big Bang, estimated to be some 10 to 20 billion years ago (Ferris, 2000). The expansion of space has continued to carry galaxies and all matter further and further apart, while the force of contraction continues to act within galaxies, crunching them together, creating and enlarging black holes at their center. One of the major debates in the field of cosmology is which of these two forces will ultimately prevail to determine how the universe will ultimately come to an end.

While expansion of space continues to carry galaxies and all matter further apart, the mutual gravitational force exerted by those galaxies and all the other “stuff” in the universe acts as a brake, slowing down the expansion rate (Ferris, 2000). The victor of these two forces will determine the ultimate fate of the universe, a fate that scientists have been able to narrow down into three possible scenarios: a *flat universe*, a *closed universe*, and an *open universe* (Ferris).

In the event of gravity winning the battle, the expansion would eventually come to a complete halt and then actually reverse and begin to contract in upon itself, ultimately vanishing in a fiery apocalypse in a manner almost exactly opposite to the original Big Bang. This concept has been given the name *the Big Crunch*, and this type of

universe is what is known as a closed universe (another speculated outcome in this case is a perpetual “crunching” and re-expanding, a concept known as *the Big Bounce*).

In the event that expansion wins the battle, the expansion of the universe would simply continue forever until all of the galaxies would be unimaginably distant from each other, leading to an open universe, or what is referred to as *the Big Chill*. Eventually, all of the stars would wink out, the black holes would eventually dissipate, and finally even the atoms themselves would disintegrate, as the proton is speculated to be unstable and eventually doomed to decay (though this decay would most likely not happen until  $10^{30}$  years from now, a period of time a quintillion times longer than the present age of the universe (Tyson, 1999).

In the event of a perfect tie between the forces of contraction and expansion, the universe would slow down almost completely and remain at nearly the same finite size. Expansion could never quite come to a complete stop or, because of the force of gravity, it would then proceed to collapse in on itself. This scenario of a perfect tie between the forces is referred to as a flat universe.

Krauss (1999) described these three scenarios—the open universe, the closed universe, and the flat universe—as being “analogous to launching a rocket faster than, slower than or exactly at the earth’s escape velocity—the speed necessary to overcome the planet’s gravitational attraction” (p. 52).

While at first glance these three scenarios may appeal to common sense, they arise from an underlying assumption that has recently received a severe blow. It was originally believed that there was no significant expansive force at play at all on the cosmic level of the universe—that all outward expansion observed in the universe is not a

force at all but merely the inertial remains of the outward impulse of the Big Bang. Significant evidence has recently come to light, however, that brings serious doubt to this belief. If the expansion of the universe were only inertial remains, with the contractive force (gravity) being the only remaining player, then the rate of the universe's expansion would have to be diminishing, even though, as mentioned above, it may still continue to expand into an open universe. As it turns out, however, recent evidence suggests that not only is the rate of expansion *not* diminishing, it actually appears to be *increasing* (Krauss, 1999). In other words, it appears that a very strong expansive force is still active on the cosmic level. This also implies that, based on the limited understanding we have now, an open universe appears to be the most likely fate.

***Entropy—a measure of duality?*** In the event of an open universe—resulting in an immensely vast and diffuse region of space dotted with widely spaced black holes that are slowly decaying—both contraction and expansion will be taken to their furthest extreme, and it becomes evident that both contraction *and* expansion may be correlated with entropy.

Gravity plays an important role in the increase of entropy. This is apparent when one considers the effect gravity has on something of very high order (low entropy) such as a tall stack of blocks; and, when taken to its most extreme form, gravity creates black holes (also known as singularities) that represent matter in a state of nearly maximum entropy (Greene, 2003). Recall that another way to view entropy besides simply a measure of disorder is a measure of the amount of energy that is unavailable to perform work; and, in the case of a black hole, it is apparent that virtually all of its energy is

completely locked up and unavailable. So, there is significant evidence that the force of contraction is pulling the universe towards increasing entropy.

The force of expansion, with its eventual drive toward dispersing all matter and energy in the universe, can, paradoxically, also be seen as taking the universe in the direction of maximum entropy. As matter and energy disperse and decay, the temperature of all matter within the universe approaches absolute zero, and any available energy becomes increasingly unavailable. Ironically, even the black holes will eventually yield to the expansive force as they slowly evaporate (in the form of *Beckenstein-Hawking radiation*; Greene, 2003) in their final stage towards the maximal entropy condition in which even matter no longer exists (Tyson, 1999).

Considering my earlier suggestion that expansion and contraction may be the fundamental forces involved in the drive towards increasing duality and that expansion and contraction also appear to be the fundamental forces involved in the drive towards increasing entropy, I suggest the possibility that duality (in general) and entropy are highly correlated phenomena, and so, consequently, another way to interpret entropy is as simply the measure of the degree of duality.

### ***The Drive Towards Unity***

***Evolution.*** If we assume that evolution is true and take the time to contemplate the path that it has taken—from the atoms contained within stars to the complex molecular structures that make up planets, oceans, and atmospheres, to single-celled life forms, to the myriad complex life forms we observe today—we can see that several themes emerge. One theme that is immediately apparent is that organisms and living systems have arisen with ever-increasing complexity, intelligence, cooperation, and

awareness. The human brain, for example, one of the most recent manifestations of the universe, is more complex than anything we know to have ever existed, with over 100 billion neurons, each connecting with up to thousands of other neurons, with the entire lot interacting harmoniously and cooperatively in a healthy brain (Bear, Connors, & Paradiso, 2007). Another theme that is readily apparent is that life is one of the only manifestations of the universe that reverses entropy.

In 1964, NASA recruited a number of scientists in an attempt to work out a life-detection system for detecting life on Mars. Lovelock, one of the recruited scientists working on this project, realized that the most important and perhaps most difficult question that needed to be addressed was, “What is life, and how should it be recognized?” (Lovelock, 1995, p. 2). He was only able to come up with one answer—“I’d look for an entropy reduction, since this must be a general characteristic of all forms of life” (p. 2). Other prominent physicists of this century who have attempted to define life, including Nobel-laureate Edwin Schrodinger, came to the same general conclusion (Lovelock, 1995). Others, such as Canguilhem (1943/1991), have offered definitions of life based on subjective experience, but, because these fall outside the worldview of positivistic science, I will not address these here. While it is relatively undisputed that the ability to reduce entropy is a key characteristic of life, the problem is that other entities that we generally do not think of as living, such as fire, hurricanes, and eddies in a flowing stream, also have this property.

Joyce of the Scripps Research Institute tried to solve this problem by proposing that Darwinian evolution is a second defining characteristic of life (Mullen, 2002). This addition, however, rather than solving the problem, only poses new questions. When

looking at the entire process of universal evolution, it is obvious that the shaping, driving forces beneath evolution are far broader and far older than the genetic mechanisms that Darwin has proposed. From this perspective, then, it can be argued that the other “nonliving” entropy-reducing entities have also evolved. The debate, then, about how to distinguish the “living” from the “nonliving” is still very much alive in physics, biology, and other related fields; but, while the details of this debate fall outside the scope of this paper, I would like to explore the relationship between the reversal of entropy and evolution from a slightly different angle.

*The organic process.* *Negative entropy* is defined as being essentially the opposite of entropy. Whereas entropy can be defined as a measure of disorder or unavailability of energy, *negative entropy* can be defined as a measure of order or the amount of available energy. *Evolution* is defined in *Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary* as “a process of continuous change from a lower, simpler, or worse to a higher, more complex, or better state” (“Evolution,” n.d.) In other words, in the context of the thesis I have been building, I would like to suggest the possibility that evolution can be seen as a process that is fueled by the drive towards unity and can be measured in negative entropy.

It is well accepted in Western cosmology, as well as many spiritual traditions of the world, that all manifestations of the universe have arisen from a solitary source. When we look at evolution from the assumption I have been drawing from so far—that it has been a relatively seamless process from the birth of the universe through the present day and continuing into the future—I would argue that it becomes impossible to draw that defining moment in which life began. As discussed above, all that positivistic science has been able to say about living organisms and living systems is that they reduce entropy

and that they evolve, characteristics that are quite frustrating for scientists who are trying to explicitly define life, because these same two characteristics also apply to entities that many of us do not intuitively ascribe to life (such as fire, hurricanes, and even planets) (Mullen, 2002). I suggest, however, that by attempting to define life in this way, we are embarking on a dead-end path. Rather than attempting to define life in terms of entities or even systems, perhaps it might prove more useful to define life in terms of a process, and I would like to explore the possibility that this process is simply the manifestation of the drive towards unity.

I find it tempting to use the term *evolution* to define this process; but, while *evolution*, as it is generally defined, certainly captures much of the manifestation of the drive towards unity, I do not believe it captures the entire process. As defined earlier, the term *evolution* points specifically to the “change from a lower, simpler, or worse to a higher, more complex or better state” (“Evolution,” n.d.). When we reflect upon the more advanced manifestations of this process (specifically, those entities we ordinarily think of as “living systems” or “living beings”), we realize there is much more going on than merely evolving from simpler states to more complex states. There are also processes such as healing (returning to a previous level after injury) and homeostasis (maintaining a state of relative equilibrium).

Over the years, a number of people have attempted to come up with terminology that more fully captures this entire process. Whyte (1974), for example, has defined the *morphic tendency* as “the ever-operating trend toward increased order and interrelated complexity evident at the inorganic, the organic, and the human level” (p. 25). Rogers (1978) defined the *formative tendency*, speculating that

. . . there is a formative tendency in the universe, which can be traced and observed in stellar space, in crystals, in microorganisms, in organic life, in human beings. This is an evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater interrelatedness, greater complexity. In humankind it extends from a single-cell origin to complex organic functioning, to an awareness and sensing below the level of consciousness, to a conscious awareness of the organism and the external world, to a transcendent awareness of the unity of the cosmic system including people. ( p. 26)

On the cosmic level, as discussed above, it appears that the drive towards duality has the upper hand (the universe as a whole appears to be moving towards maximum entropy, or maximum duality). On the organismic level, however, the level of the organic process, it appears that the drive towards unity is the most powerful player. On this level, the galaxies have evolved into stars and then to planets and then to living organisms and finally to more complex and conscious organisms—on this level, it appears that the universe is moving in the direction of greater order, complexity, cooperation, and unity. In this dance between these opposite drives, we see the forces of contraction and expansion hard at work, and we also see both the drive toward duality (in the forms of decay, disorder, disintegration, and death) and the drive toward unity (in the forms of birth, growth, homeostasis, symbiosis, and love) hard at work. In fact, life as we know it simply could not exist without all of these various forces, without this entire dance. Yet, within the realm of evolution and life, virtually all evidence points to ongoing progress in the direction of unity. It is this movement towards health, wholeness, and unity in the face of duality—and also, ironically, in *collaboration* with duality—that I define as the *organic process*.

### *Section Summary*

Before addressing the limitations of positivistic science and presenting some other perhaps less limiting perspectives, it will help if I briefly summarize the interpretations I have drawn from what I believe are some of the most relevant discoveries and theories obtained from this worldview.

I have so far described what I have interpreted as two dichotomies in our universe, one nested within the other: an overarching dichotomy comprised of the drive towards unity and the drive towards duality; and a second dichotomy—which makes up the drive towards duality—being comprised of the drive towards contraction and the drive towards expansion.

I have suggested that the drive towards duality may be significantly correlated with entropy, and I have suggested that entropy (which is defined loosely as a measurement of both disorder and the lack of available energy) may actually be seen as simply the measure of the degree of duality. The drive towards duality is most evident when viewing our universe as a whole—even though there are pockets where entropy is decreasing, our universe as a whole is clearly headed in the direction of increasing entropy (a process so reliable and constant that it is labeled the *arrow of time* in the field of physics), and therefore increasing duality.

Negative entropy, on the other hand, has the opposite qualities of entropy and can be seen as a measure of order and available energy; therefore, I have suggested that it can be seen as a measure of the degree of unity. Our universe began its life in a state of maximum negative entropy (maximum order, available energy, and unity), and, while negative entropy in the universe as a whole has been constantly decreasing (i.e., entropy

is increasing), there is clearly a process at play in the universe that is significantly correlated with an increase in negative entropy and unity. In the life sciences, this process has been equated with the evolution of life, but because this process has clearly been at play since long before the arrival of what we tend to consider living organisms, and because the term *evolution* emphasizes change but fails to adequately address other essential aspects in the process towards unity (such as healing, homeostasis, symbiosis, etc.), I have suggested that the entire process that has been moving towards unity since the birth of our universe be referred to as the *organic process*.

Even though I have essentially equated the organic process with the drive towards unity, I must add at this point that I believe it is really not quite as simple as this. It is clear that the drive towards unity must travel, in a sense, against a current that is flowing in the opposite direction—the drive towards duality. Just as what I have been calling the two fundamental aspects of duality—contraction and expansion—converge and dance together to form the various manifestations in the universe, I would like to hold the possibility that a similar dance between the drive towards duality and the drive towards unity is at play. Cosmically, we see evidence that the universe as a whole continues to expand while galaxies continue to contract into black holes, revealing an ongoing drive towards duality. In the long term, however, we see a universe that will eventually return to a unified form (either by vanishing in the fiery apocalypse of the Big Crunch or by evaporating in the long cold death of an open universe). On the organismic level, we see more and more complex organisms continue to develop with ever higher levels of self-awareness and an apparently increasing capacity for unitive experiences, revealing an ongoing drive towards unity; and, we also see death, decay, and the return to more

primitive, dualistic forms. A similar dynamic can be seen to be playing out on the subatomic level, only much, much more rapidly. Research has shown that, even in the vacuum of apparently empty space, there is constantly seething activity in which subatomic particles (known as “virtual strings” in string theory) literally manifest from a sea of uniform energy and immediately pass away into the same sea of uniform energy (Greene, 2003). I find it tempting to speculate that the processes being carried out on these two vastly different scales (the macroscopic and the subatomic) represent different manifestations of the same fundamental dance between the drive towards duality and the drive towards unity.

In my discussion so far, I have made the attempt to remain true to the positivistic worldview, referring to evidence and theories generated from “objective” empirically based evidence (with the exception of a few brief references to mystical traditions). Also, being true to the positivistic worldview, I have attempted to wrap up our current understanding of the universe within a neat and tidy intellectual “nutshell”; in this case, the so-called nutshell has been my concept of the *organic process*. I believe, however, that while such attempts may be interesting and even helpful, they are ultimately doomed to never fully capture or mesh with our experience of the world. So, I would like to turn now to explore the concept of *organismic wisdom* using some other ontological methods.

**Part 2:**  
**Organismic Wisdom—the Subjective Experience of the Organic Process**

*The Limits of the Intellect*

As helpful as the positivistic approach can be in that it gives our rational mind something tangible to hold on to, it has some highly significant limitations. In this worldview, reality is seen as being *atomistic* (being comprised of individual entities at its most fundamental level), and it is also seen as being “out there,” as separate from “us.” The problem with attempting to address the fundamental interconnectedness of all manifestations of the universe from within this worldview is obvious—we are trying to study the issue of unity while coming from the assumption of absolute duality. How can we explore subjectivity from within a framework that gives all importance to objectivity? Ironically, the two largest divisions of modern physics—relativity and quantum physics—both of which are directly affiliated with positivistic science, have come to the conclusion that genuine objectivity simply does not exist (Bohm & Hiley, 1993).

Modern physics—generally considered to be the pinnacle of positivistic science—has revealed a number of conundrums and paradoxes within the positivistic worldview (Bohm & Hiley, 1993). One of the most well known of these is the observed paradox that light can be interpreted simultaneously as both a wave and a particle. A second significant paradox has to do with the observation that when one particle is observed and measured (and therefore affected, because quantum theory has demonstrated that observation always creates an effect), another particle located in a different part of the universe is also *immediately* affected. Because the result is immediate, there is not even the possibility that some information was transmitted from one particle to the other at the speed of light. Reality, then, must involve a level of *nonlocal interconnectivity* that is not

contained within the fabric of time and space (Bohm & Hiley). While many unsuccessful convoluted attempts to address these and other such paradoxes have been made, all such evidence continues to point to some serious flaws with the positivistic worldview. Bohm and Hiley, theoretical physicists who have been involved in this discussion for many decades, have suggested that the evidence points to an entirely different paradigm, one that Battista (1996) summed up well, calling it a *holistic paradigm*:

Knowledge is conscious, consciousness cannot be separated from matter, consciousness is hierarchically organized, the observer cannot be removed from what is observed, and the world of knowledge is based on quantum-actions, or information events that involve the interaction of parts of one interconnected, conscious universe. (pp. 203-204)

Ironically, it seems that positivistic science has evolved to a point in which its own evidence has begun to unravel its own epistemological foundations.

I believe our intellect tends to appreciate quantitative explorations of the world because the process of conscious cognition is fundamentally dual—we create divisions in the world so that we can think about and discuss them. Wilber (1990), a leading transpersonally oriented scholar, has suggested that paradox is what we encounter when we reach the bounds of a theoretical framework. I tend to agree with this and would like to add to this by suggesting that paradox is what we discover at the bounds of the intellect itself. Our intellect is very powerful when it comes to solving problems, planning, making predictions, and bending the material world to our will; but, I believe our intellect is simply not a tool that can experience the world beneath the level of duality. Because it uses dualistic means, I believe it is destined to remain within dualistic experience. I believe, however, that the intellect does have the capacity to take us right to the furthest edge of duality and point a metaphorical finger in the direction of unity. If we want to

venture any further, however, then I would argue that we have to rely on direct subjective experience.

### *Finding Peace With Paradox*

As we shift from the relatively abstract discussion of subatomic and cosmological realms and philosophical debates on the definition of life and begin to look more closely at actual human experience and honor subjectivity, it becomes apparent that defining the four fundamental drives that I have outlined (contraction and expansion, duality and unity) as dichotomies is not quite accurate. *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* defines *dichotomy* as “a division into two especially mutually exclusive or contradictory groups or entities” (“Dichotomy,” 2009). At first glance, unity and duality do seem to be mutually exclusive and contradictory, as do contraction and expansion; but, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the elements of each pair do not *contradict* each other. In fact, many influential thinkers and spiritual teachers have pointed out that the opposite seems to be true—that they appear to *mutually create* each other.

Based on our direct experience of the world, it seems that all four of these fundamental drives are equally valid and equally necessary elements of all manifestations of the universe and life as we know it. Looking at these drives in this way, it seems that the term *paradox* would be more accurate than “dichotomy.” *Paradox* is defined in *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* as “a statement that is *seemingly* contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true [emphasis added]” (“Paradox,” 2009). A paradoxical statement is only *seemingly* contradictory, rather than *actually* contradictory, and there is the implication that it opposes common sense yet is still true. Our intellect tells us that the same entity cannot simultaneously have *both* the qualities of

contraction *and* expansion, yet introspection into our subjective experience will reveal that we do (e.g., ambivalence). Similarly, our logic tells us that the various entities of the universe cannot be simultaneously discrete entities *and* manifestations of a unified whole, and yet modern physics and the personal experiences of many reveal that we *are*. I believe that this struggle to come to terms with the fact that we have qualities and experiences that are *both* contractive *and* expansive, and to find peace with the fact that we are *both* utterly isolated and alone *and also* deeply and fundamentally interconnected, lies at the crux of the human dilemma.

### ***Organismic Wisdom***

Virtually all of us are aware of the dual aspect of our nature—the sense that there is an “I” distinct from the rest of the universe; and, within this aspect, most of us can relate to the forces of contraction and expansion. Schneider (1999) referred to the subjective experiences of these as *constriction* and *expansion*. He defined *constriction* as “the perceived ‘drawing back’ and confinement of thoughts feelings, and sensations . . . [with] constrictive consciousness [being] characterized by yielding and focusing elements” (p. 33); and, he defined *expansion* as “the perceived ‘bursting forth’ and extension of thoughts, feelings and sensations . . . [with] expansive consciousness [being] characterized by asserting and incorporating elements” (p. 33). Looking at our experience from within the context of these definitions, then, most of us would find that we are familiar with constrictive experiences such as shyness, anxiety, and depression, and with expansive experiences such as anger, lust and greed.

Likewise, most of us have also experienced some degree of the unified aspect of our nature. Such experiences could range from feeling a sense of wholeness, ease, and

integration within our own beings, to a sense that we are intimately interconnected with someone or something outside of ourselves (such as feeling a simple sense of love for another being or feeling connected with a divine source). Some even claim to have experienced the furthest reaches of unified experience—total dissolution of the self altogether (such as the state defined as *nibanna* in Buddhist teachings).

Schneider (1999) suggested that “*dread* of constrictive or expansive polarities promotes dysfunction, extremism or polarization [and that] appropriate *confrontation* with or integration of the poles fosters optimal living” (p. 33). In other words, as both constrictive and expansive experiences are an unavoidable part of our experience, having aversion to them only increases our suffering; and, not only does it increase our suffering, but, ironically, our aversion and fear of such experiences actually strengthens them. On the other hand, when we find the courage and willingness to face these experiences, we find that it is possible to develop a sense of mastery within our experience (Schneider). We learn that we can actually develop the ability to return to center, and, as our confidence builds in this regard, we find that we can expand the range of our experiences along the constrictive/expansive continuum. With such development, we find that such an expanded range provides us with the means to live a relatively healthy and fulfilling life. Such capacity is what is found in what Schneider referred to as the *optimal personality* (p. 142). Such a personality does not remain centered in the sense of literally remaining in a neutral, central position where there is neither constriction nor expansion; it remains centered in the paradoxical sense of being able to maintain an overall integration of both poles while also maintaining the ability to shift from one extreme to the other.

I would like to suggest that what I have been calling the organic process flows in just this way—just as the organic process maintains the constant intention of returning to unity in the midst of duality (expansion and contraction), so does the optimal personality maintain a sense of integrity and an ability to return to “center” as one navigates the range of the constrictive/expansive continuum. In other words, perhaps the optimal personality is simply one that is in contact with, and nonresistant to, the natural flow of the organic process within; and, when one is at peace with this natural flow, acknowledging the wisdom of it and not resisting it, then, paradoxically, one becomes much more free to direct one’s will. Rogers (1978) described this idea very eloquently:

With greater self-awareness a more informed choice is possible, a choice freer from introjects, a conscious choice which is even more in tune with the evolutionary flow. There is (to use Claudio Naranjo’s term) an organismic convergence with that directional evolutionary process. (p. 25)

I define *organismic wisdom*, then, as this subjective experience of the organic process. In other words, I suggest that organismic wisdom is the wisdom of the organic process itself—a wisdom as old as our universe (if not older), a wisdom that is much deeper and broader than what we can possibly find in our intellect. Rogers (1978) used an eloquent metaphor to illustrate this:

[We can imagine] the human organism as a pyramid of organic functioning, partly suffused by an unconscious knowing, with only the tip of the pyramid being fleetingly illuminated by the flickering light of fully conscious awareness. We are thus much wiser (organismically speaking) than our intellects, than our consciousness. (p. 25)

Because we are manifestations of the universe, and because we are essentially products of the organic process, this vast wisdom is our birthright and is innate within every person, every living thing, and every living system.

### *Organismic Wisdom in Organic Systems*

When we consider the wisdom of the organic process—organismic wisdom—it is clear that there are signs of it everywhere. We have already explored the awesome process of evolution itself, with its progress from a sea of nearly uniform radiation at the birth of our universe to human beings—a manifestation that provides the universe with the ability to contemplate its own existence! There are living beings, comprised of billions of individual cells that are able to live harmoniously and even symbiotically with each other. There are ecosystems, comprised of billions of living beings also living in relative harmony and symbiosis. In the face of often severe illness, disorder, disease, and scarcity, these living beings and living systems are able to restore their health, maintain their functioning, and survive for many thousands of years in some cases. We are only recently beginning to appreciate just how strong the principles of unity and cooperation are within living beings and living systems. Cells within living organisms communicate with each other with a greater level of sophistication and on a greater scale than we ever imagined, demonstrating that even individual cells contain a startling degree of consciousness and will (Pert, 1997). We have learned that some plants are actually able to communicate their distress to other plants; and, even more awe inspiring, we have observed that other plants (even those we had once considered to be competitors of the former) sometimes send the much needed nutrient(s) through their roots to a mycelial network within the soil that then transfers the substance to the distressed plant (Buhner, 2002). We are finding overwhelming evidence that we are not the sole possessors of qualities such as consciousness and will, and that these along with other unitive qualities such as cooperation, homeostasis and symbiosis are found throughout the entire realm of

the organic process (Stewart, 2000). It is clear that organismic wisdom is more pervasive and more profound than we could possibly imagine.

### ***The Destination of the Organic Process***

As discussed previously, it seems that the drive towards duality and its associated processes have been taking the universe towards a state of maximal disorder and disintegration. The drive towards unity and its associated organic process, on the other hand, seems to be taking us towards a state of maximal unity. It is not too difficult to imagine the fate of the universe as it approaches maximal duality (as previously discussed), but what will the pinnacle of the organic process look like? While this subject has been addressed by numerous philosophical and spiritual traditions, a comprehensive discussion of all of these falls outside the scope of this paper. There are several themes, however, that have emerged in various traditions and which I feel are important to address here. In one theme, the organic process can be seen as that aspect of the universe that is striving towards self-actualization; in another theme, the organic process can be seen as that aspect of the universe that is striving to return to the state of absolute unity from which it originated; and, in a third theme, the organic process can be seen as striving towards a deeper sense of unity and connection but with the condition that the absolute transcendence of duality can never be achieved.

### ***The Universe Striving Towards Self-Actualization***

Abraham Maslow (1968), one of the founders of humanistic psychology, proposed that, rather than being driving primarily by the avoidance of pain and the desire for pleasure, we actually have a more fundamental striving to manifest our utmost potentials and experience the entirety of what it means to be human, a striving he referred

to as *self-actualization*. When we consider that humans are merely one of the latest in a long and vast line of manifestations of the organic process, I find it tempting to generalize Maslow's concept of self-actualization to the universe in general. In other words, Maslow's self-actualization as it applies to humans could be just the "tip of the iceberg," with the "iceberg" representing the universe itself in its striving for self-actualization. Perhaps this universal striving reveals itself in the path from the formation of a galaxy to a star to a planet to a single-celled organism to organisms with ever greater capacities for conscious awareness and finally "to a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system" (Rogers, 1978, p. 26).

### ***The Universe Striving Towards a Return to Absolute Unity***

In the West, the neo-Platonists, who were most influential in the 500 years preceding Christ, were perhaps the first to espouse the idea of a striving towards an absolute unity. Plotinus, a key founder of neo-Platonism, taught that all manifestations in the world have arisen from and will ultimately return to a single divine source, *the All* or *the One*, and that the development of virtue, philosophical contemplation, and self-knowledge will allow us to reintegrate and help us in this journey to return to our highest ideal (Wallis & Bregman, 1992). While few other influential traditions originating in the West have explicitly mentioned such a striving, the East has given birth to numerous such traditions.

Vedanta, considered one of the oldest branches of Hinduism, teaches that our primary aim is to transcend our illusion as a separate self to realize our unity with an all-pervasive cosmic consciousness (known as *Brahman*; Rambachan, 2006). Other

branches and variations of Hinduism (of which there are many) generally have similar teachings.

Taoism, which originated around 500 BCE, also speaks of an absolute unity underlying the world of form, particularly emphasizing the ineffability of this quality, which it calls the *Tao*. It teaches that the individual manifestations of the world (often referred to as *the ten thousand things*) paradoxically require the existence of each other in order to maintain their own existence, while they all ultimately arise from the undifferentiated whole (the Tao; Kohn & LaFargue, 1998). For example, brightness exists only because there exists that which we call darkness; or, we can say something is evil only when we can compare it to something that we call good. All of these forms, then, are dichotomies that arise from the Tao, which is considered to be ultimately ineffable because it lies “beneath” the dimension of all forms, concepts, and dichotomy. The aim in Taoism that is typically espoused, then, is to align oneself with this principle of unity. In contrast to most forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, however, the emphasis in Taoism is more on living harmoniously within the world of form rather than striving so much to transcend the world of form altogether (Lao Tsu, n.d./1972).

Buddhism, which ironically originated very close to the same time as did Neo-Platonism, Vedanta, and Taoism (about 500 BCE), also teaches the possibility of absolute transcendence of the dual realm. Buddhism has evolved into quite a few different versions, though they all maintain a similar core framework. I find that the Buddhist framework fits well with the thesis I have been building so far with regards to organismic wisdom, and so I think it will be helpful to take a brief detour and expand upon it a little further.

***The Buddhist Perspective:  
Siddhattha Gautama—A Scientific Pioneer***

When discussing the “Buddhist” perspective, it is important to remember that Siddhattha Gautama (“the Buddha,” which simply means “the awakened one”) did not start the religion of “Buddhism” and actually had no intention whatsoever of founding a new religion. He was merely interested in discovering the root of human suffering and determining if there were any possible way out of it. He actually went about his pursuit of this truth in a very scientific manner, though not positivistic science, and, if one looks closely at his story, it becomes apparent that he was arguably one of the first great scientists in recorded history. A major difference between Gautama’s scientific epistemology and that of positivistic science, however, was that he gave primary importance to subjective experience, ultimately teaching that there is no true “objectivity” (as modern physics has also since concluded) and that what we mistakenly take as neutral objective observation is actually significantly distorted by our own delusion.

Because Gautama was most concerned with human experience, and especially with the issue of suffering, he chose to study his own. Though what we refer to as “the scientific method,” the keystone of quantitative scientific research, had not been specifically formulated at that time, by looking at his explorations now, we can see that he initially followed it surprisingly closely. Gautama first made an observation: “There is suffering.” He then asked questions: “What causes suffering?” and “Is there a remedy?” He then proceeded to work through a series of hypotheses and related predictions. His early life allowed him to test out an initial hypothesis unwittingly, the same hypothesis that many of us, especially in Western industrialized society, still cling to today:

“Suffering is caused by desire; therefore, indulging one’s desires should end suffering.”

Gautama was born a prince and spent the first 29 years of his life enjoying all the luxuries available at that time, having a wife and a family he loved very much. However, after 29 years, it was apparent to him that he was still suffering; he was still not satisfied.

Therefore, this first hypothesis was not supported by the test—it appeared that indulging one’s desires did not end suffering—and so he was forced to revise it and come up with a second hypothesis and related prediction, this time setting up the experiment intentionally.

Gautama’s second hypothesis could perhaps best be formulated as: “Suffering is caused by desire; therefore, denying oneself of all desire by living an ascetic life should eventually eradicate desire and lead to the end of suffering.” He devoted the next 6 years of his life (from the age of 29 to 35) testing this hypothesis. He spent the majority of each day sitting in painful postures, practicing deep concentration-type meditations, eating only the absolute minimum to just survive, sleeping the barest minimum, and refusing any pleasures such as sex and enjoyable food and drink. Finally, at the brink of starvation, he realized that he was not any closer to finding a cure for suffering. His second hypothesis, therefore, also failed to hold up under thorough testing—it appeared that suppressing one’s desires also did not end suffering.

After taking a somewhat quantitative scientific approach to the above two hypotheses, Gautama decided to take the powers of concentration he had mastered during the previous 6 years of practice and direct his attention inward to the natural process of his own mind and body, to attempt to explore the deepest fundamental truths of his experience. At this point, he essentially turned to a method of inquiry very similar to

what we would call *qualitative* research. While quantitative research is generally more connected with the positivistic paradigm, qualitative research is connected with very different paradigms (typically *postpositivism*, *constructivism*, *advocacy/participatory*, and *pragmatism*, the discussion of which falls outside the scope of this paper; Creswell, 2007). In these paradigms, subjective experience is given primary importance; the researcher acknowledges that she cannot be a purely neutral observer; and inductive rather than deductive logic is used (meaning details are explored before generalizations are made, and questions are continually revised as new experiences arise; Creswell). After limited success with quantitative methods, Gautama is said to have sat down under the famous Bodhi tree and to have vowed with a strong determination to sit contemplating his experience until he fully understood the root of suffering: “Let me die. Let my body perish. Let my flesh dry up. I will not get up from this seat till I get full illumination” (Mara, n.d.). As the story goes, by the following morning, he had found the truth that he was looking for.

Gautama (now known as “The Buddha,” “the awakened one”) came to the conclusion that the root of suffering is not desire, per se, but ignorance to the true nature of the world. Desire is merely our natural *response* to viewing the world incorrectly (Epstein, 2005), not the fundamental *cause*. His experience revealed to him that there are just three fundamental qualities of the phenomenal world (the world of duality): (a) it is impermanent, constantly changing, constantly fluxing and flowing (he called this *anicca* in the Pali language which he spoke at the time); (b) all manifestations of the world ultimately arise from and return to the same source, are in fact all interconnected, being merely different manifestations of the same underlying whole (*anatta* in Pali); and (c) all

manifestations of the world, including us, experience suffering to one degree or another due to the apparent isolation and very real groundlessness and perpetual shifting of the situation in which we exist (*dukkha*; Bodhi, n.d.). As human beings, we experience this suffering as a perpetual dissatisfaction with our situation—we are perpetually seeking a deeper love and connection, and are perpetually grasping for solidity and security in a world that is fundamentally ungraspable and insecure. So, the Buddha claimed to have come to the realization that until we are able to experience these fundamental truths of reality, we will never be able to find peace with them and will continue seeking happiness in unfruitful directions.

When caught up in delusion, according to the Buddha’s teachings, we will find our experience riddled with unpleasant, reactive emotions. According to The Dalai Lama, “delusions are states of mind which, when they arise within our mental continuum, leave us disturbed, confused and unhappy. Therefore, those states of mind which delude or afflict us are called ‘delusions’ or ‘afflictive emotions’” (“A View on Buddhism”, n.d., ¶ 1). Once we are able to remove the dust of ignorance from our eyes and directly experience our interconnectedness with all things, we will naturally discover a sense of love, compassion, and sympathetic joy. By directly experiencing the fundamental impermanence of the world and learning to befriend it, we will naturally discover a sense of equanimity. These four qualities (love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) are often referred to as *The Four Immeasurables* (“The Four Immeasurables: Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity,” 2006). Their presence is considered to be the natural experiential state (our *Buddha Nature*) remaining when we relinquish our ignorance. From this perspective, then, our afflictive emotions “cover up” our ever-present Buddha

Nature. When we fully experience our Buddha nature, then, we are considered to be as close to the realization of the ineffable absolute unity which underlies all form (nibanna) while still remaining connected with the realm of duality. In Buddhist cosmology, beings of the Brahma realm, those considered to be the closest to having returned to the fully unified realm while still maintaining the last wisps of duality, are said to reside constantly within this state (Kloetzli, 1983).

*Contraction and expansion within the Buddhist perspective.* From the Buddhist perspective, all afflictive emotions are believed to have the quality of either craving or aversion, or some combination thereof (Hart, 1987). Craving, which is a desire to bring something towards oneself, or to take something in, could perhaps be seen as a manifestation of the expansive force (in the sense that we are seeking to expand our own being to take in/consume more); and aversion, which is the desire to push something away, could be seen as a manifestation of the contractive force (in the sense that we are seeking to draw more tightly into ourselves and resist external entities and/or forces). We can see this quite clearly when observing how an amoeba or another single-celled organism interacts with its environment. Taken as a whole, then, the entire dualistic realm, being comprised of contractive and expansive forces (and therefore, within the subjective context of Buddhist teachings, craving and aversion), could be seen as having the inherent quality of perpetual discontent—or in Buddhist terminology, dukkha.

*Duality and unity within the Buddhist perspective.* The Buddha taught that it is possible for our awareness to transcend the phenomenal realm altogether—to become aware of the realm that lies beyond duality, the realm which is both the source and the destination of all phenomenal manifestations, the realm of absolute unity he referred to as

*nibbana* (Nibbana, 2005). The Buddha never attempted to describe this realm, as it lies beyond the realm of concepts (which are a function of duality), though he did refer to it as the realm from which all manifestations (the entire realm of duality) arise and will ultimately return (Hart, 1987). He taught that the only way we could ever be truly free of suffering (of *dukkha*) was to depart the realm of duality altogether and return to the realm of absolute unity. Because of these teachings, many accuse Buddhism of being nihilistic; however, I believe that a more accurate way to interpret these teachings is that the return to the condition of absolutely interconnected unity, which is arguably the opposite of annihilation, is the final goal. Sogyal Rinpoche (2002) used the metaphor of a full water vessel floating within the ocean to illustrate this idea. The vessel separates the water inside from the water outside. When one has an experience of *nibbana*, one has the realization and direct experience that, ultimately, the water inside the vessel is the same as the water outside, and the vessel itself is only an illusion. Upon attainment of full enlightenment, then, the vessel disappears altogether and the essence inside merges with the unity of the ocean.

Some Buddhist teachers use the word *goal* to describe our return to unity, but this word, especially in the highly competitive Western society, is at risk of reinforcing our aversion to our present experience. The Buddha taught that if one is caught up in intense striving to reach unity, one is actually paradoxically running in the opposite direction—reacting towards one's present experience leads one towards more suffering and more duality (craving and aversion). It is only through finding acceptance of our present experience that we are able to further our progress towards integration and unity (Hart, 1987). Ironically, then, from this perspective, the more we accept our suffering, the more

love, compassion, joy, and equanimity we will experience; and, it is only when we have released all of our reactivity and are fully immersed in the Four Immeasurables that our being naturally leaves the realm of duality altogether. Considering this, perhaps a more helpful way to look at our relationship with unity is not as a goal to strive for but as a final destination, the path of which can offer our lives some meaning. By developing greater awareness and acceptance of our predicament and the associated suffering, we gain immediate benefits and, perhaps, if the Buddha is correct, we may return to a state of unity that is totally free from suffering a little sooner.

### *The Dialogical Perspective*

After discussing a number of spiritual traditions that espouse the idea that manifestations of the universe have originated from and will eventually return to a state of absolute unity, it is important to mention an alternative view. Theistic religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism generally teach that the various manifestations of the universe are forever relegated to maintain some sense of dualistic separation from the divine source (God). It makes sense that the intellectual study of such teachings—with the dualistic function of the intellect combined with dualistic teachings—would keep one fixated on the idea that the universe is unshakably dualistic. However, many of those who contemplate these teachings in an experiential way—such as devotees of the “mystical” divisions such as Sufism and Hasidism—express that they hold duality much less rigidly. As discussed above, by loosening their grip on the intellectual realm and putting more emphasis on subjective experience, such people have been able to embrace paradox, validating both unity and duality. Martin Buber (1878-1965), a widely renowned Jewish

philosopher, theologian, scholar and teacher who spent the majority of his life grappling with this very issue, is an excellent example of such an individual.

During Buber's career, he took much interest in Vedanta, Taoism, and Buddhism, while maintaining devotion to his roots in Hasidic Judaism (Friedman, 1986). He admittedly wobbled back and forth on the issue of an attainable state of absolute unity, but, after decades of intensive study and experiential contemplation, he finally came to settle on the conviction that while we can experience a paradoxical incorporation of both unity and duality, a state of absolute unity with our divine source can never be fully attained:

One thing must of course not be lost sight of: unification of the soul is never final. Just as a soul most unitary from birth is sometimes beset by inner difficulties, thus even a soul most powerfully struggling for unity can never completely achieve it. But any work that I do with a united soul reacts upon my soul, acts in a direction of new and greater unification, leads me, though by all sorts of detours, to a *steadier* unity than was the preceding one. Thus man ultimately reaches a point where he can rely upon his soul, because its unity is now so great that it overcomes contradiction with effortless ease. (Buber, 1961, p. 433)

I believe this passage captures the essence of Buber's formulation of what he calls *the dialogical*. He espoused the importance of striving towards a state of unity with other manifestations as well as with the Divine (what he referred to as the *I-Thou* relationship, as opposed to the *I-It* relationship, in which distinct duality is maintained) while believing that absolute "unification of the soul is never final" (p. 433). Buber implied in the last line of the above passage, however, that as we achieve deeper levels of unity, we can begin to hold the paradox of *both* unity *and* duality "with effortless ease" (p. 433).

**Part 3:  
Reflections on a Personal Experience with Organismic Wisdom**

After discussing the organic process and organismic wisdom in theoretical, philosophical, and spiritual frameworks, I would like to devote the final section of this paper to a brief exploration of how this topic might apply to an individual's actual lived experience—in this case, my own.

*An Existential Crisis*

Several years ago, I had fallen into a deep existential and spiritual crisis, and I found myself grappling with the theme of organismic wisdom in what felt like a fight for my own existence. While several paradigm-shattering epiphanies led me into the depths of this crisis (the details of which fall outside the scope of this paper), the final epiphany that ripped the carpet out from under my feet was a deep experiential realization of the fact that my perception of the world is seriously distorted by my own cognitive constructs. This epiphany put me into a space in which I felt I had very little to cling to as a way to make sense of the world, and I found myself perpetually on the verge of being overwhelmed by powerful emotions and other anomalous experiences for many months. I was fortunate to have developed the resource of a mindfulness meditation practice (in which I made the effort to remain aware and equanimous of the sensations within my body), and this provided me with a means to find at least some semblance of stability in the midst of these storms. I was also fortunate that, due to the nature of my work and lifestyle, I had a lot of time to deeply explore these storms and work on finding some peace and understanding of them. In the initial stages, I recognized these many storms as long-suppressed emotions, finally free to flow to the surface, seeking new balance as my

previous defenses had now become so seriously undermined. As time passed and I explored more deeply into these emotions, however, I realized that a more fundamentally existential struggle that lay beneath that of my personal history was taking place.

I found myself in a struggle with two diametrically opposed fears. On one hand, I experienced a profound fear of losing control, a fear related to the sense that I was on the verge of total self-disintegration or self-annihilation, a fate that seemed somehow even worse than death. This fear led me deeper into contraction and isolation, keeping me grasping in futility for some kind of solid ground to hold on to. On the other hand, I experienced a profound fear of isolation, of being all alone. Along with this newfound awareness emerged another powerful realization—I realized that, paradoxically, this battle of fears was also simultaneously a battle of desires. Somehow, the fears and desires made up one felt experience. The fear of losing control, of losing my sense of self, was coupled with an intense desire to solidify my sense of self, the striving for which resulted in a deepening sense of loneliness and a distancing from love, connection, and the realization of unity. On the other side of the struggle, the fear of being utterly alone and isolated was coupled with an intense desire for love, connection, and unity, the striving for which seemed to jeopardize the cohesion of my self. As this struggle raged on within me, I felt as though I would be completely ripped apart. I felt caught in an impossible dilemma.

After many months of this struggle, I was having an especially difficult week. I had just returned from a 10-day intensive silent meditation retreat that had only seemed to intensify the struggle. My entire being was almost constantly racked with the pain of the struggle, and only rarely did I manage to catch brief moments of sleep. I felt that I was

approaching the limits of my strength and feared that I would soon succumb to some form of self-annihilation (though I did not know how this would happen exactly, I imagined that it would take the form of either utter madness or death). About a week after my return from the retreat, I finally fell into a relatively deep sleep, and, in it, a dream came to me that would completely change my life.

*I was standing in a field, soaked with sweat from the unrelenting terror. I looked around and saw a number of others also standing in the field with me, sweat dripping from their faces, each one clearly stuck in a struggle very similar to mine. I then turned around to a fellow struggler standing behind me, looked him in the eyes, and said, "I'm not going to drink." This statement refers to a previous inclination of mine to get drunk with a few friends when I was experiencing a lot of pain; but, now, I was determined to work through this hell with clarity and courage. He nodded back to me, indicating that he was also willing to stand strong and work through the pain and terror, and then I turned to look forward again. We soon found ourselves being led into a meditation hall.*

*We "strugglers" each stood on our own meditation cushion with our eyes closed, listening to the gentle murmur of a group of teachers standing at the front of the hall, discussing our condition. After a few moments, they were silent, and I knew that they had come to an answer. I felt one of them approach me, and, though my eyes were closed, I could sense vibrant warmth and motherly love emanating from this being, whom I sensed had the form of a beautiful woman. I sensed her bringing a spoon up to my mouth, filled with some liquid; and, with the most tender, compassionate voice, she said, "Don't suffer, take this . . . please don't suffer, take this." Though I sensed nothing but pure compassion, love, and wisdom from this woman, I found myself struggling to trust her.*

*“What if they’ve come to the conclusion that the only way to end our suffering is to kill us with poison,” I thought. “But maybe they’re right—maybe death is better than living in this hell state—anything would be better than this. But no, I don’t want to give up! There must be some other way.” I stood there, completely tormented, not knowing what to do, feeling my soul stretched to the edge of its limits, not being able to imagine any hell worse than this state of intense terror and despair . . . and yet . . . somehow . . . I found the courage to open my mouth and take the liquid. Pushed to my furthest extremes, I somehow found the courage to let go and accept . . .*

Just as the spoon touched my lips, I felt a wave of cool, refreshing relief flow through my body from head to toe, and I woke up. My sheets were still soaked with sweat from my terror (not unusual for those months of my life), but now I felt unbelievably peaceful, in a state of ease that I had hardly recognized. I noticed that the fiery coal that had been burning in my solar plexus constantly for the past 3 months was completely gone.

***Finding Faith in Organismic Wisdom—  
From Dichotomy to Paradox***

It was about 4:00 a.m., and everyone in the community was asleep. We lived on a large grass airfield, and I walked across the field to the lake, taking in the stars and the sound of the crickets, feeling so connected with everything, so peaceful and relaxed. I was a bit confused as to what had just happened, but I knew that a very profound shift had taken place. After sitting by the edge of the lake for awhile, drinking in the world in this new light, it became clear to me exactly what had happened. I had finally experienced what it was like to “let go.” I had seen vividly how for months I had been teetering on what felt like a knife edge between two abysses—on one side there appeared

to be an abyss of total self-disintegration, and on the other side an abyss of overwhelming despair, loneliness, and isolation. I had been desperately holding on to the idea that I somehow had to remain in control, that if I did not tenaciously strive to “hold myself together,” I would succumb to an unbearable fate. This dream, then, catalyzed a much needed shift from desperately struggling to control my experience to finding faith in organismic wisdom.

By not acknowledging the organismic wisdom within my being, by not realizing that my being naturally has the wisdom to follow the organic process and naturally find a sense of health and harmony, I had been inadvertently fighting it, creating more and more of a dualistic split within my being, and therefore more and more suffering. Ironically, it was only when I was in sleep, when my conscious mind was not so active, that organismic wisdom (in the form of the compassionate woman) was able to assert itself and provide my conscious mind and will with the opportunity to relinquish this struggle and regain faith in it. The moment I released the struggle and surrendered to organismic wisdom (by accepting the spoon), I experienced an immediate sense of relief and reintegration. I realized that it was possible to comfortably hold *both* a sense of duality (that there was an “I” separate from the rest of the world) *and* a sense of unity (that I was fundamentally interconnected with everything else). It could be said, then, that virtually all of this pain had been caused by mistaking a paradox for a dichotomy.

The logic of my rational conscious mind had not been able to find any way to hold the validity of both duality and unity, and so I had been caught up in a terrifying struggle with no apparent resolution. I learned that it required a wisdom much deeper than that of my conscious mind to provide me with the ability to recognize and to hold

this paradox. My conscious mind, with its lens of logic and reason, had only been able to perceive the world as dichotomies and therefore had to wrestle with the impossible decision of choosing between *either* duality *or* unity; this innate wisdom, on the other hand, was capable of holding the paradox that *both* duality *and* unity are valid subjective experiences.

That night, I had had my first real taste of surrendering to this innate wisdom, and there was no denying the cessation of suffering that came with it. By finding the faith to accept that there is a deeper source of wisdom within my being, by relinquishing my need to be in control, I had finally touched the peace that had always been waiting for me just beneath the surface of all that turmoil. I could see now very clearly that it was the struggling itself, caused by the lack of faith in my own innate wisdom, that had created all that pain; and, ironically, I could see that by releasing my intense need to remain in control, I had experienced a degree of freedom and choice I had never imagined was possible.

As I continued to sit on the shore of the lake that night, soaking in this new yet strangely familiar experience, a sliver of light formed on the Eastern horizon and began to swallow the stars, one by one. The impermanent nature of this world revealed itself, and I recognized that this state of profound peace would also pass; after all, it seems that everything in this world is impermanent, even peace. Recognizing the tenacity of my will, even after the night's epiphany, I could foresee a fresh new batch of suffering on the way as I would inevitably attempt to "hold on" to this peaceful state, and I had to smile. I would enjoy the delicious nectar of this peace while it lasted, but I would have to learn to let it go like everything else.

*Alternating Between Dichotomy and Paradox—  
A Dialogical Perspective*

On the night of my dream, it was clear that I had experienced a state of profound integration, though it is also clear that I still remained within the realm of duality. I recall feeling a sense of interconnectedness to a degree I had not felt before or since, and yet I still very much felt a sense of “me.” As I reflect now upon this experience while holding in mind Buber’s teachings, I would say I was enjoying an I-Thou relationship with the world. It is clear that my active paradigm had gone from one of dichotomy before the dream to one of paradox afterwards—or, in Buber’s words, from I-It to I-thou. I have learned that the paradigm which is active for me at any given time is far from static, and I have since noticed an ebb and flow between feeling this paradoxical incorporation of unity and duality (the I-Thou), and feeling a more rigid sense of duality (the I-It). This corresponds well with Buber’s claim that we typically experience an oscillation between the I-Thou and the I-It relationship throughout our lives, with the I-Thou relationship being generally much rarer. This oscillation can even be seen within a single interaction as Buber (1923/1996) so eloquently put it in the following:

Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines—one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity—so it is with the human being to whom I say [Thou]. I can abstract from him the color of his hair or the color of his speech or the color of his graciousness; I have to do this again and again; but immediately he is no longer [Thou]. (p. 59)

The implication here is that even in those rare moments when we are experiencing an I-Thou encounter, we still find it necessary to oscillate between the I-Thou and the I-It if we want to also maintain a sense of interaction and communication, something that is so important in meeting our day-to-day needs.

*Glimpsing Through the Veil of Delusion—  
A Buddhist Perspective*

As I alluded to earlier, this crisis was precipitated by the direct experience of my “veil” of cognitive constructs. Such a veil is something that numerous spiritual teachers, philosophers, and psychologists have suggested we all create in a perfectly natural attempt to make sense of the world and to interact within it. As I became aware of this veil, what I glimpsed beneath it was both awesome and terrifying, an experience that directly led to the crisis I described above. When attempting to describe what I experienced beneath this veil (something I do not believe I could ever adequately put into words), I find it helpful to use the metaphor of a dynamic swirling sea of energy—a sea of constantly changing sensory experience (including light, sound, tactile sensations, even thought) in which there is no solidity anywhere. I felt out of control, at risk of being flung about by the chaotic currents, and I found myself both awestruck and terrified. I desperately wanted to grasp hold of something tangible, to find some sense of ground, but each time I allowed my intention to move towards making an attempt to grasp, I was quickly overwhelmed by intense terror. This inspired me to somehow find the means to pull back a little and take some cover once again behind my cognitive constructs—the shapes, sounds, and sensations becoming more recognizable once again. The most terrifying aspect of all was the sense/realization that “I” myself had no solidity. This feeling, combined with the sense/realization that the boundary between the “sea” and “I” was very frail, led to the fear that I would somehow dissolve into this chaotic “sea” (as described in more detail above).

I found that the qualities I experienced in this realm correspond well with the Buddhist perspective. Ultimately, I found only three qualities in this realm: everything

seemed to be interconnected, which corresponds with the Buddhist description of anatta; everything seemed to be dynamic and constantly changing, which corresponds with the Buddhist description of anicca; and my desperate desire to grasp onto something solid in this world in which nothing was solid led to immediate suffering—dukkha. Anatta, anicca, and dukkha are the three qualities that the Buddha has described as making up the realm of duality, and I certainly felt that I was drowning in these qualities. As mentioned previously, the Buddha also claimed that there is a fundamental ground of unity beneath the realm of duality (i.e., nibanna), though if such a realm does exist, I certainly did not experience it.

During the first few months of this crisis, I felt as though I were nearly constantly teetering on the edge of this seething realm of duality in its raw form, though I always somehow managed to maintain some semblance of the world as seen through my cognitive constructs (even during the initial experience). Often, when the seductive quality of this realm got the better of me, I would touch into it intentionally, wondering what would happen if I had the courage to somehow totally let go into it. I imagined that I would either pierce through the realm of duality altogether and experience the ineffable realm of unity that the Buddha and so many mystics have talked about, or I would become utterly and indefinitely lost in a hellish chaos, perhaps leaving a catatonic body to live out its days with a vacant stare. To this day, I never have found the answer to this question, and I must say I am happy that my cognitive constructs have since become much more stable (a turning point that seems to have been catalyzed by the dream). While this whole experience has left me with a great appreciation of the value that our cognitive constructs provide in allowing us to interact with the world, it has also left me

with the realization of just how constructed our interpretation of the world really is; but, along with this realization has come another realization—that these constructs do not have to lock us into a rigidly held paradigm but actually have the potential to be quite open and flexible, offering us the possibility to live a life that includes a good-enough balance of security, freedom, autonomy, and love.

#### **Part 4: Implications for Mental Disorder**

Although a thorough discussion of mental disorder (what is often misleadingly termed *mental illness*) falls outside the scope of this paper, I feel that it is important to mention some implications of mental disorder within the context of organismic wisdom.

One significant implication is that it can be caused by struggling against one's own organic nature. A number of recent scholars, researchers, and practitioners have suggested that anomalous experiences—those experiences falling outside of the realm of “consensual reality” that are often termed *psychotic* or *mystical* experiences—are typically caused by a healing- and/or growth-oriented shift, though one that may sometimes be ultimately maladaptive (Chadwick, 2001; Clarke, 2001; House, 2001; Jackson, 2001; Laing, 1967; Margree, 2002; Perry, 1974). I suggest that these shifts, described by most of these researchers as a movement beyond the limitations of our conditioned cognitive constructs, can be seen as being directed by organismic wisdom. In other words, perhaps such shifts can be seen as a natural movement of the organic process acting within us, attempting to move us towards deeper integration, with a corresponding loosening of the dualistic limitations imposed by our own cognitive constructs.

Because certainly some degree of a cognitive framework is required for us to be able to interact with others and function in day-to-day living, it is natural that such a loosening of this framework can be very disorienting, often leading to terror, despair, and other overwhelming emotions (although moments of euphoria may also be experienced if the liberating potential of such a shift is glimpsed; Clarke, 2001). These are all experiences commonly reported by those going through such a process (Chadwick, 2001;

Clarke, 2001; House, 2001; Jackson, 2001; Laing, 1967; Perry, 1974). Added to these potentially overwhelming emotions, if we live in a society that only pathologizes such a process without acknowledging its potential for healing and growth, we are in danger of finding ourselves in a horribly painful battle between our conscious minds and organismic wisdom, such as the one that I experienced. Such a battle could surely lead to many different manifestations of mental disorder, including many, and perhaps most, of those categorized within the DSM-IV (American Psychological Association, 2000).

Within my own experience with this type of struggle, the list of diagnoses that could have possibly been assigned to me would have been very long (including, but not limited to, panic disorder, major depression, mania, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, and even several of the psychotic disorders); but, as the intensity of my struggle faded, so did all of these various mental disorders.

One way to gain significant validation for this theoretical framework for mental disorder is to compare rates of occurrence and recovery of mental disorders between societies with different levels of acceptance for such processes. Psychotic disorders, which most closely correspond with shifts of cognitive constructs, would be particularly relevant here. Indeed, such evidence does exist and is highly significant. Numerous studies have shown that societies such as the wealthier Western societies that strictly pathologize and clearly impede such processes (by using interventions such as stigmatization, forced psychotropic medications, and removal from society via forced hospitalization in what are often cold and hostile environments) have a substantially higher occurrence rate and lower recovery rate than societies (often called *developing* societies) that provide more validation for such processes (Bentall, 2003, 2004; Breeding,

2008; Breggin, 2008; Hopper, Harrison, Janca, & Sartorius, 2007; House, 2001; Read, 2004; Whitaker, 2002). The evidence is mounting that if we want to support the organic process flowing within us and minimize the intense suffering caused by our resistance to it, we must go through a radical paradigm shift in the way we view mental disorder and sanity.

### Conclusion

This exploration into the organic process has taken us from the speculated birth of our universe to various imagined endings, into paradoxical continuums of contraction and expansion, unity, and duality. Such philosophical explorations often bring up more new questions than answers, as is certainly the case with this one. The Western scientific journey, which began with its positivistic assumptions of an objective reality that can be known through the scientific method, has taken us to relativity and quantum mechanics, the theories of which have led to paradox and apparently unsolvable conundrums, creating serious doubts about the assumptions that gave birth to them. The introspective journey, into the phenomenological study of our own subjective experience, has taken us even deeper into this paradoxical realm, allowing us to experience directly the various drives directly within our own beings. We find these various drives interacting so profoundly that we have great difficulty agreeing on the best way to distinguish and explain these experiences—untold amounts of philosophical, psychological, and spiritual systems have sprouted as a result of such attempts. Of the many questions that come to my mind, one of the most frequent is, “Exactly how beneficial are such explorations?” Clearly, many have gained benefit, but, where is the line between benefit and simply intellectual entertainment? And where is the line between intellectual entertainment and the mental anguish caused by the desperate and compulsive *need* to understand, something that has clearly plagued many great thinkers and philosophers?

To these last questions, I am tempted to answer that the greatest benefit of such an exploration is simply our acknowledgment of the organismic wisdom contained within our beings. The wisdom of our conscious mind is only the tip of that immeasurably vast

“iceberg” of wisdom contained within our beings, a wisdom that is constantly active within every cell of our bodies and perhaps ultimately within every manifestation of our universe. Once we acknowledge that we contain this wisdom within us, we realize a profound choice we have, perhaps the *most* profound choice that we have. We can choose to ignore or even fight against the wisdom of the organic process flowing within our beings, a choice that has the potential to lead to untold anguish and suffering, or, we can choose to align ourselves with organismic wisdom—or, as Carl Rogers (1978) so eloquently put it, to create “an organismic convergence with [the] directional evolutionary process” (p. 25)—and realize our true capacity for genuine health, growth and relationship.

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