THE SERIES

*Fairmont State College Occasional Papers* publishes the texts of lectures and other writings of professional interest by faculty and staff members of Fairmont State College. It is edited by Professor Wayne R. Kime of the Department of English and is distributed free of charge to friends of the college.

THE TEXT

The text printed here is based on a lecture delivered on April 22, 1996 as an installment in the Presidential Lecture Series initiated in 1989 by Dr. Robert J. Dillman, the current president of the college.

CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

613.71  Bohnke, David R.
B635w    Wellness : expanding horizons / by David R. Bohnke
         12 p. ; 23 cm. -- (Fairmont State College occasional papers ; no. 8)

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Between 1969 and 1977 Dr. Bohnke was professor and chairperson of the Physical Education department at Bluefield State College, W.V. He moved to Fairmont State College as a professor of Physical Education in 1977 and has served in that capacity since. In recent years he has extended his professional interests into the field of Counselling Psychology. He was awarded the M.S. in that field from West Virginia University in 1993. Currently, in addition to performing his teaching duties, he serves as a licensed professional counsellor.
As well-informed individuals we all know generally what is meant by that popular term, wellness. If we were to attempt an abstract definition, we might arrive at something like this: “Wellness in human beings is an integrated and dynamic level of functioning, one dependent on self-responsibility and oriented toward maximizing potential.” (Robbins 10) But we need not confine ourselves to academic formulations like this one. Probably after a moment’s thought we would agree that wellness is more than a matter of physical fitness alone. Instead, it manifests itself in multiple, interacting areas of our lives. It is a state of being, a pattern of living wherein one’s physical, intellectual, emotional, social, occupational, and spiritual dimensions coordinate and integrate.

Before I describe some of the distinct yet interrelated dimensions of wellness, I would like to introduce a few ideas about memories—a topic that may initially seem unrelated to my theme. Memories are unique internal experiences that enable each of us to revisit and examine the past, preserve something of the present, and even consider the future. Even though our mental retention of past events is neither complete nor entirely accurate, the scenes and persons and events and impressions we do recall stand out for some reason, and they can help us discern order and meaning in our lives. Memories tend to accumulate in patterns, or center upon recurrent themes, and thinking about these can help us integrate our past, our present, and our projected future.

At this point I would like to introduce a familiar image as an integrating visual symbol of wellness. The image I have in mind is the horizon. One cannot travel far within our part of the country without encountering splendid vistas, scenes that enrich our experience and expand our perceptions. Passing through those locations we sense the presence of history, we are aware of the present moment, and through imagination we may glimpse moments to come. We are part of an encompassing, integrating scene that exists in multiple dimensions.
The successful pursuit of wellness, as I understand the concept, requires that we view our memories and our continuing lives in light of certain unifying principles which, even though we may not consciously affirm them, afford us stability, identity, and self-comprehension. One such principle may be imaged as an expanding horizon. If we consider for a moment how our lives began and opened out as years passed, that image will surely present itself.

When we are born, our horizon is extremely limited—about the size of our mother’s arms. But soon we are home from the hospital and being carried from room to room, and our physical world has begun to expand. We find ourselves outside in the yard, or down the block. Our horizons continue to move outward as some day we ride in the car, or take the bus all the way across town, or outside town. During this period of our young life our physical wellness is surging toward its peak. No one has to coax a healthy five-year-old to ride his or her bicycle, play hide-and-seek, or run about the neighborhood. Wellness, at this stage, expresses itself in constant physical adventure. How fast can I run? How high can I jump? How far can I throw? Self-directed questions like these reveal the developing child testing his or her limits, at work to extend the personal horizon. At the same time, all unaware, the child is establishing physiological mechanisms that will significantly influence his or her physical wellness in later life—blood pressure, for example, or the ability to maintain appropriate body weight.

When we enter school the expansion of our horizons continues, manifesting itself in new ways. In Geography class we learn something about distant places—Asia, Australia, Antarctica. We study Astronomy, and our mental reach extends yet further. We study History, and our understanding of ourselves reaches back in time. Our studies in Psychology and Philosophy encourage us to think in terms of an internal world as well as an external one. Within the world of abstraction we may explore questions of right and wrong, consider the moral nature of things, wonder about the reasons for our being alive.

Many of our experiences as adolescents continue to involve vigorous play activities which provide a context for physical, emotional, and social development. Our cardiovascular, muscular, respiratory, and reproductive systems are all approaching maturity. Through interactions at home, at school, and on the playing fields a personal system of morality and ethics is taking shape. Ideas about suitable behavior within the dialectics of fairness and unfairness, cooperation and competition, inclusion and exclusion,
sufficiency and excess are being formulated, acted upon, and modified, often within the contexts of recreation and sport.

Perhaps as we approach adulthood we reach our highest degree of essential wellness. We are passing through a period of unwilled yet real integration, of equilibrium between our physical, intellectual and emotional selves. Whatever inadequacies and doubts we may feel as adolescents, we are accessible to new ideas, willing to test new principles, and primed to explore new activities. Our growth as persons is expressing itself as exploration of our expanding horizons.

But at some point in our early lives an opposed phenomenon comes into play. Our horizons open out at varying rates, in varying directions, and at times of stress they also contract. If, for example, we catch a bad cold or the flu, we are “not ourselves” for a few days, and we know that in order to recover we must cut back our schedule, stay at home, get plenty of rest. A measure of the severity of whatever distresses us is the degree of contraction it imposes on our accustomed personal horizons. Hospital patients exemplify this principle of consolidation under stress. Naturally enough, their thoughts and energies are focused primarily upon their own ailing bodies. “I’m in pain here, the doctor saw a change there, that nurse should have answered my emergency buzzer by now.” Self-protective focusing of this sort reminds me of the situation early in the Civil War when, in order to ensure the security of the national capital, President Lincoln found it necessary to redeploy Union troops then far afield in Pennsylvania and Virginia. He was right, of course, to do so, and his strategy proved successful. When we fall ill we temporarily redefine our frontiers, contract our horizons so as to marshal our forces and overcome what threatens our well being.

The effects of emotional illness may also be imaged as a contraction of horizons, but with a somewhat different pattern. In search of sanctuary and stability, we withdraw into ourselves, as if moving toward the center point in an arrangement of concentric circles. Imagine a pioneer stockade in the midst of a wilderness. So long as we feel safe and secure, we are content to remain barely within sounding distance of that fortress. We seek adventure and take risks as part of our enterprise. However, when we feel vulnerable and threatened we retreat from the exposed outskirts to a place of safety. To express this self-protective reflex in terms of psychology, when we are confronted by emotional or mental illness we regress to a stage of emotional maturity during which we felt secure.

We call the expansion of our personal horizons growth, but we might also term it wellness, for the state of being well is one
wherein we are able to grow outward. Conversely, we call the contraction of our horizons, whether physical or emotional, by the term illness. We might also regard it as a retreat from our accustomed level of wellness. Of course, one day we all will pass from life—grow weaker, fall gravely ill, and die. In that process we will experience a mirror reversal of the stages through which we developed as young persons. We will abandon one by one our outer ramparts and finally return to the helplessness of infancy. At last, instead of returning to the womb, we shall pass away into the space of death.

At many points during our lifetimes we recognize the temporary expansion or contraction of our personal horizons. As I just mentioned, during bouts of illness our horizons draw inward as by a will of their own. As we gain strength and begin to recover, we reassert our claim over former areas of interest or occupation. We ask after absent family members, we look forward to seeing tomorrow’s newspaper. The expansion and shrinking of horizons during periods of wellness and illness is predictable and involuntary; we are simply programmed in that way.

However, some potential causes of contraction in our personal horizons do remain under our control. I have especially in mind the causes of emotional illness—a condition so prevalent in our contemporary culture. The root cause of this epidemic of emotional unwellness is not, I believe, in the affected individuals themselves. Rather, our culture itself shows symptoms of illness. The condition manifests itself in accommodation of a destructive phenomenon that has been named “tribalism.”

The term tribalism does not refer to particular groups, as of native American social units, nor does it imply criticism of any such groups. Tribalism is a state of consciousness, and an unhealthy one. It is a drawing inward of one’s personal horizon to a point where one’s sole focus of energy and concern is one’s own tribe, or family, or profession, or set of ideas. Tribalism is rampant in the academic world. Some of us become narrow advocates of certain theories, or approaches, or areas within our disciplines. Commitment to these ideas or emphases has been our means of coming into prominence, and now we are determined that everyone else ought to follow the same paths. Our instinct to consolidate our academic turf within a particular area of study gives rise to verbal and political warfare between various schools of thought. And we know well the not always silent contempt with which some academics regard those in other disciplines. Nor is tribalism limited to the academic world. We see its corrosive effects even now in Bosnia, in northern Ireland, in the Palestinian Strip.
To repeat: nothing is wrong with the tribe, but much is wrong with tribalism. Of course, one can make a case for singleminded devotion to a tribe of almost any sort. By means of focusing his or her activity and energy on a particular group, an individual learns much about human nature and human interaction generally; it then becomes possible for him or her to expand the horizon of association and commitment, viewing persons outside the clan with sympathetic understanding. Unfortunately, the observed facts rarely confirm this comfortable speculation. Tribalism is divisive and constricting, both collectively and individually, and it is emotionally unhealthy. In fact, it poses a grave threat to the wellness of the human community.

If we are to extend our horizons freely and so promote our personal wellness, beyond remaining alert to the danger of narrow tribalism we must adopt specific means of enhancing well-being that do remain within our own control. One potent force for the preservation of adult wellness is a faculty we inherit from our childhood, namely curiosity. A lively interest in our own ongoing work, and in the activities of others, is a sign of health and a key component of an expanded horizon. How often do we find occasion to talk with persons whose interests, experiences, and views are radically different from our own? Are we curious about what they have to tell us? On another level, thoughtful attention to our own cognitive and affective biases and habits, with a similar alertness to those of others, facilitates expansion of our personal horizons through interpersonal contact.

Another useful practice is to turn an inquiring eye on our actions or habits of mind that have settled into patterns. For example, I may have taught a particular course, to similar students, in the same room, on what seem countless occasions. Yet I cannot be certain that this day’s class, or these students, will merely re-image earlier ones as one paper clip does another. I need to resist the tendency to pattern my anticipations and my behavior as if I were encountering only “the same old stuff.” I need consciously to envision the experience as something to be encountered for the first time, and then to respond to it accordingly. The tendency to pattern our behavior is often an unconscious attempt to reduce anxiety, a self-protective mechanism that has become established through countless subtle interactions. On the other hand, re-visioning requires initiative, but it can make our daily world a more interesting and exciting place. It promotes wellness because it fosters an attitude that welcomes new experience rather than in a sense dismissing it before it occurs. We say to ourselves, “Let’s see what
happens here” rather than, with a bored yawn, “Ho-hum, same old stuff.”

The condition known as “burnout” occurs among professionals in all areas, but it seems especially to afflict educators. I believe one reason why members of the teaching profession suffer from this horizon-shrinking condition is that, for one reason or another, many persons have stopped asking questions about what they teach and the manner in which they teach it. Consequently, their work grows dull. To the burnt out professional, work is a tiresome charade—the same old material presented to the same old students who show the same old deficiencies. Yet, much of the mischief lies in the instructors’ attitude. By responding in a patterned, “usual” manner to ever-new persons and circumstances, they have grown, perhaps less anxious and keyed-up, but also uninspired and weary.

A third means through which we can foster our own wellness grows out of the first two. Curiosity, combined with willingness to break out of constraining patterns, impels us to extend our present horizons through continued learning. Of course, not all knowledge is truly mind-expanding, as our discussion of academic tribalism makes clear. The knowledge that contributes to wellness is pursued and valued for its own sake. We are stimulated in pursuit of it and enriched in our possession of it. Our horizons are expanded because of it. At the very edge of our horizon as human beings is, not knowledge in an academic sense, but the sense of meaningful order that comes to us through religious faith. Our spiritual life helps keep us attuned to great principles beyond our limited capacities, principles which, we may believe, actuate the physical and moral worlds. Faith in a supernatural power is thus for many persons an essential element of wellness, for it lends shape and meaning to their widest conceivable horizons.

Yet, despite its importance and unique value, religious faith and practice is not without its peril to wellness. For some persons and sects it can serve as a basis for exclusion as well as inclusion, a validation of self-conceit, a system to promote spiritual tribalism. The religious tradition in which I grew up assured me, subtly and also explicitly, that I was better than other persons. I was “saved” and they were “damned”; my group was in a “state of grace” and others were “heathens.” By heathens, I recall, my elders seemed to mean ignorant louts who seldom bathed and who planted corn by the light of the moon. This perspective of superiority entitled my group, the insiders, to look down on others, the outsiders. The hymns we sang echoed with arrogant self congratulation on how cozy we were with the Almighty and on what a high opinion He
had of our tribe. But we lacked wellness of spirit.

A fourth contributor to wellness grows from the first three: a sense that our personal experience has meaning. Several years ago a study was conducted at the Medical School of Cornell University. Its objective was to isolate the critical factors that influence one’s recovery from serious illness. The researchers wished to discover what distinguished two individuals who came from the same approximate background, and who had undergone the same medical procedure, but who returned to wellness at different rates. Statistical studies relating patients’ levels of optimism to the clinical data of their recovery proved inconclusive. An attempt to correlate active belief in a higher power with an accelerated rate of recovery was no more successful. At last, the research team hit upon a predictor of early recovery that proved almost definitive. The patients who regained their health more rapidly were those who felt there was a meaning or purpose in everything that happened to them, including illness. They believed that nothing in their lives was without meaning. (Beck)

Let me relate the results of this inquiry to our image of the horizon. If we adopt the view that some elements of our experience have meaning but others do not, we shrink the horizon of our world. We in effect refuse to take seriously large areas within our lives. But once we permit ourselves a more encompassing viewpoint, our horizons expand. Everything we encounter carries with it some latent meaning and so merits our thoughtful involvement. The psychologist Viktor Frankl explores implications of this concept in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1963). On the basis of his experiences as a prisoner in German concentration camps, Frankl developed a form of existential psychology he named “Logotherapy.” The chief premise of his approach is that when an individual loses the sense of a purpose in life he or she loses the will to live. A patient’s return to emotional wellness depends upon his or her affirming a sense of meaning in existence.

A fifth tool to preserve our emotional wellness and so maintain an expanded personal horizon is the great gift of humor. Maintaining a lively sense of the ludicrous is a wonderful means of ensuring our openness to experience, for humor admits everything. Often humor occurs as the result of uncertainty or misconception. We think there is only one possible explanation for some situation or other, but behold!—new and perhaps better ones present themselves as if from nowhere. On many occasions our delight at what we find comical brings with it a flash of new insight into matters we have come to take for granted. And on other occasions our sense of
humor is what helps us to muddle through. Adapting a bit from William Wordsworth, James Thurber once defined humor as “emotional chaos recalled in tranquillity.”

The principle I have been developing, that voluntary effort to keep our horizons expanded fosters wellness, works in practice. We serve our best interests by working, steadily but not grimly, at being well. Still, programmatic effort to stay attuned to a wide range of experience cannot serve by itself as a basis for self-understanding and action. In order for us to consider a second, complementary principle, let us imagine our model of the horizon turned over onto its side. We see an image in two dimensions, having length and extent but not depth. This image emblematizes my idea that, as we move toward wellness, we need to cultivate within ourselves a third dimension which we shall call personal depth, or character.

We seek to extend our spheres or interest and commitment, but we need also to explore more deeply the territories close at hand, where we are most at home. Attuned as we are to our own habits and predispositions, we need to monitor the developments in our lives and so recognize the evolving relationship between what we do and who we are. One process that facilitates this self-awareness is a scheme of behavior known as action-reflection.

A friend of mine follows a daily practice that exemplifies the discipline of action-reflection. Each night he sits in his Oregon home and mentally projects onto his study wall images of that day’s events. He “replays” his day, observing it as if from outside, considering its events large and small to see what he can learn from them. His life is an active and a reflective one, his daily experience providing him material for thought and for learning.

As children of a hyperactive culture, most of us tend to be “action” people—and indeed, are rather pleased to be so. When we meet a friend and ask how he or she is doing, often the answer is some variation on “busy, busy, busy!” The conversation continues. “Can we get together sometime soon?” “Oh, I don’t know, I’m so busy!” But the habitual overbusyness of “action” people marks a lifestyle gone out of proper balance. We need also to be “reflection” people for whom, as for my friend in Oregon, it remains possible to find time for quiet thought about our experiences. Action-reflection is a path that leads us deeper into our home territory. The method that underlies its alternating pattern is utilizing the insights we obtain about ourselves so as gradually to transform who we are. The process contributes to our wellness by empowering us to affect our own character and behavior.
Too often in the United States today we glorify ability without character, idolizing persons like Donald Trump, Madonna, and any number of sports heroes. “Action” people these all may be, but they are far from being models of decency and depth. If a culture’s heroes reflect its values, then our heroes and heroines indicate that Americans underestimate some of the primary constituents of character. Yet personal depth, or character, is an important dimension of wellness, a condition we do profess to value. Perhaps as Americans we need to reconsider the qualities that ought to define our cultural icons, paying greater attention to elements of character that make men and women most fully, admirably human.

Exactly which qualities of thought and behavior are evident in a person of character? I can think of five essential ones, the first of which is honesty. Without question, being honest with oneself about oneself is a challenge. It imposes on us resistance to rationalization, willingness to admit error and face up to shortcomings, recognition of our inevitably flawed and limited human nature. Yet unflinching honesty about oneself is not merely humbling, it is also liberating. It reminds us that we can only do our best and that we cannot be everything to everyone, and so it liberates us from vain effort to realize the impossible. Absolute honesty toward others, on the other hand, is a goal not always worth pursuing. The speaker at a workshop I once attended confessed: “I used to feel that it was my duty to tell the truth to everyone. I learned my lesson. Now I give the truth only to those who can use it.” Determining the proper degree of frankness toward others is a delicate matter. Yet retaining the will always to speak the perceived truth as fully as the situation permits and never to misrepresent is a safe general rule.

A second defining feature of character grows from the first, I think, and that is trustworthiness. We need to return to the time when a person’s word was his or her bond, when a handshake, not a sealed contract, was sufficient to mark a binding agreement. We need to fulfill what we promise, keep our appointments, pay our bills and arrive, so far as possible, on time.

A third indicator of character is integrity. A person of integrity coheres, hangs together as a unit, is himself and herself and no other. Integrity is a mark of wellness. When we selectively apply different ethical guidelines in varying situations, we blur ourselves and so diminish ourselves. If we permit our “work” ethic to be inconsistent with our “private” or “personal” ethic, we have reason to doubt who we really are and what we believe.

A fourth element of human character is personal responsibility. It is popular these days to blame our present predicaments
upon past experiences beyond our control. For example, persons who have been abused or experienced a less-than-ideal childhood often account for failures, disappointments, and criminal activity in their later lives by reference to those harmful early influences. I do not discount the real influence our personal histories can have on our present behavior and circumstances. Still, even though an individual may have suffered harm of some kind in the past, the primary determinant of his or her fate in the present is the sense of personal responsibility. Either that individual remains mired in a self-defeating passivity, a feeling of helpless victimization, or else, by assuming responsibility for his or her future course of life, the individual takes steps that lead toward wellness.

Many of my students and clients have profited from keeping in mind the adage, “It is not what happens to you that forms your life; it’s what you do with what happens to you that creates character.” (Bandura 191) Despite having been deprived of positive nurturing experiences, they took responsibility for their own futures and thus enriched their lives. Or else they put to good use the imperfect tools fate gave them—a “slow intellect,” for example, or a flawed physiology—and thus enhanced what they did and strengthened their character into the bargain. The student who has failed a class, and the professional who has lost his or her position, and who are determined to prove that those who “failed them” or “fired them” have ruined their lives, will probably be successful. We can always prove “they” have ruined our lives if we choose not to have a life in the aftermath. Everything depends on what we do with what we are given, upon the sense of personal responsibility we bring to steering our future life’s course.

The fifth and final component of character is moral responsibility, or the will and capacity to accept the consequences of our actions. When we say, “This happened to me because of what I did,” we may experience discomfort or chagrin or shame, yet we are also granting ourselves power. If something unpleasant occurs as a consequence of something we have done, then we have the power not to do it again. But if we insist to ourselves that the bad result was the result of something wholly outside ourselves, we have in effect declared ourselves helpless and hopeless. The ability to accept responsibility for our actions is a mark of wellness.

We all, I imagine, would like to be well in at least some of the ways I have been describing; and, if we teach, we want also to foster wellness in our students. How shall we go about realizing these good intentions? Fair enough, we’ll keep in mind the idea about expanding our horizons while avoiding tribalism in our thinking.
We’ll also seek to explore in depth the territory we occupy, mindful of the opportunity to further shape our character as we do so. But is there any way in which we can see these two notions, expansion and exploration in depth, as parts of a single concept?

For me, these two principles coexist and are reconciled within the human experience of love. Love exhibits two reciprocal rhythms, passion and compassion. When passion is present, we care so deeply about an individual or group, an institution, or an idea that we narrow our horizons to focus on that object. But then, as a consequence of this focused passion, we learn to direct part of our feeling and commitment outward toward all and everyone we encounter. Passion involves limitation and focusing of one’s deepest feelings and energies; compassion is the movement outward of those same energies, encompassing a wider and yet wider horizon.

Love, the ultimate expression of wellness, is self-transcendence. It enables us to expand our sense of identity toward at first another person or group of persons and finally toward our whole human family. St. Paul regarded love as the defining mark of spiritual wellness. In his first letter to the Corinthians he identified those qualities of spirit manifested by persons whose personal horizons are wide yet deep, whose relations toward others exhibit both passion and compassion. “Love,” he wrote, “is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. . . . So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”
WORKS CITED


SUGGESTED FURTHER READING


No. 2. Ronald D. Pearse, “Ethical Behavior is Strategic Behavior” (1991)

No. 3. John M. Teahan, “’One of the Nation of Many Nations’: Walt Whitman and Multiculturalism” (1992)

No. 4. Judy Prozzillo Byers, “Teaching the Art of Living: The Education Philosophy of Ruth Mary Weeks” (1993)


COLOPHON

This issue of Fairmont State College Occasional Papers was designed electronically by Robert L. Heffner, Jr. of the Fairmont State College Learning Resource Center using Adobe PageMaker 6.0© on a Macintosh© computer. The type font is Palatino. The issue was printed by Tammy Holden and Joni Bokanovich of the Fairmont State College Printing Shop, on Beckett Cambric© paper — 80 lb. India Cover and 24 lb. India Writing. The paper is manufactured with at least 50% reclaimed fiber (10% to 50% post consumer fiber).
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