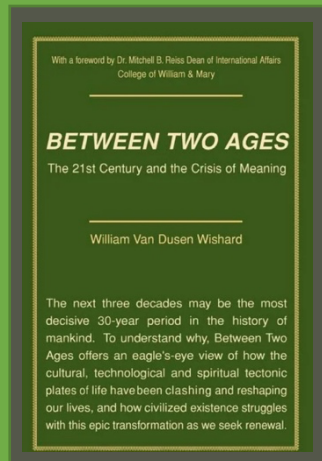


Thoughts from Linda:



**Between Two Ages**  
*The 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Crisis of Meaning*

William Van Dusen Wishard  
2003

*“Human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell, only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap. There are times when a whole generation is caught in this way between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standard, no security, no simple acquiescence.”* Herman Hesse

This quote is the origin of the title of this remarkable book by William Van Dusen Wishard, who heads the Washington-based consultancy, WorldTrends Research. Its focus is on the current time period, specifically the first 30 years of this century. It is a dense but highly engaging read that addresses the large questions about ‘man’s search for meaning’ in a world that, he argues, is firmly between two eras.

Van Dusen Wishard is well-equipped to author this book, having spent his life in public and government service. Following WWII, he served in a civilian task force chartered to re-establish connections with the German people. He had a similar assignment in the years following the Vietnam War where he also helped train democratic principles to students and governmental personnel. He has worked in over 30 countries and served his country in the Army. He has briefed Congressional delegations and served in the Department of Commerce, where he focused on global competitiveness during the Reagan administration. He has a wide range of accomplishments that span the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The book is peppered with his personal stories and accounts of meetings with governmental leaders such as Dwight Eisenhower, Adlai Stevenson, and other big thinkers, including Peter Drucker and Alvin Toffler. He provides a synthesis of thought in the first half of the book that establishes the context for the last half. In fact, the first

seventeen chapters set the stage for a deeper dive into what he sees as our current American dilemma.

He concludes with two final chapters--*Quo Vadis, America?* and *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Crisis of Meaning* that are definitely worth the wait and will be more easily understood because of the framing of the period from 1850 to 1950 in America, which he suggests is actually the "American Century."

The context of the book is quickly established as he notes, "...the next three decades may be the most decisive 30-year period in the history of mankind...Thus, you and I are living in the midst of perhaps the most uncertain period America has ever known--more difficult than WWII, The Great Depression, or even the Civil War.

With these earlier crises, an immediately identifiable, focused emergency existed, an emergency people could see and mobilize to combat. But the crisis today is of a different character and order. America is at the vortex of a global cyclone of change so vast and deep that it is uprooting established institutions, altering centuries-old relationships, changing underlying mores and attitudes, and now, so the experts tell us, even threatening the continued existence of the human species. It is not simply change at the margins; it is change at the very core of life. Culture-smashing change. Identity-shattering change. Soul-crushing change."

The dictionary defines interregnum as "an interval or pause between two periods of office or other things." He quotes Walter Lipman from *The Wall Street Journal* of the 50s, as he noted: "Our century is a time of flux, an interstice between eras. Old beliefs have decayed, and the new beliefs have not sprung forward to replace them." As Van Dusen Wishard notes, things do not change in an instant, and it often takes decades or centuries for the new civilization to develop, and there is often much overlap.

His theory argues that we are currently right in the middle of this interregnum, and his book is designed to help the reader make sense of this state of affairs. He frames the big questions throughout the book, but the fundamental ones are these: "As technology takes over ever more of our work, what are humans for? What does it mean to be a human being in a world of total technical possibility? Are the warnings of technological extinction credible, and if so, what do we do about them? In an age when information overwhelms us, and power is unlimited, what gives purpose and restraint to such power?"

He notes that "The truth is that all the vast changes we are bringing--instant global communication, control of plant, animal and human characteristics through genetic engineering, our ability to build new structures atom by atom, the doubling and even tripling of the human life span, thus generating social pressures we have never before experienced--these and countless more developments point to one underlying reality.

We are in the midst of redefining the human experiment with Life."

This is a big thinking book and a dense one to read. His ability to lay out context and then frame the present situation is one of the strongest I have experienced. You can tell much from the Chapter titles, and here are a few from the first part of the book: *At the Core of the Interregnum, Life in 1900, The Great Expansion, First Articulations of the Interregnum, The Intellectualization of American Life, The March of Equality, Changing Cultural Patterns, The Interregnum's Spiritual and Psychological Context, Summary of 1900--1950, The 1950's Hinge of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, What, really were the 60's all about and Future Shock and Millennial Neurosis--the 70's, 80's and 90's.*

Once the table is set with this background, he moves to the main dish, which is *Chapter 19--The 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Crisis of Meaning*. Without a doubt, this is the chapter that spoke to me with the greatest significance. In this chapter, Van Dusen Wishard presents his main hypothesis and presents evidence and his logic to explain it, but as he notes, "not to try to prove it." In an abbreviated form, it is thinking that today we are in the midst of a psychological development that represents one of the most seminal milestones in the totality of human psychology, and that is *our crisis of meaning*--in our lives, for our institutions and our world.

His hypothesis is twofold: "First, we may be in the midst of the long-term weakening of the various spiritual myths" that have sustained humanity for centuries. He is referring to the development of religious beliefs, developed throughout history that expressed "the human relationship to 'the other' (God) which provided strong ethical and spiritual frameworks for all types of individuals." Whatever the ethnic identity or stage of development of a culture or individual, these systems offered answers to the ultimate questions about man's existence. He believes that the weakening of these various spiritual "myths" is one of the root causes of the crisis of meaning today. He notes, "Such a statement may seem to fly in the face of the various spreading fundamentalisms, but fundamentalism may actually be a symptom of this demise."

His second root cause hypothesis is that "despite appearances and conventional wisdom, we've been experiencing a contraction of consciousness." His explanations of

his logic, supported by strong evidence, are both intriguing to read and most compelling. He takes us into the world of Jung and Edward Edinger, Jung's most authoritative American interpreter over the past 40 years.

He will take you through the evolution of our language and our framing of ideas and issues to illustrate our shifts, thus illustrating how our inner images of wholeness are dissolving. For example, he notes that at one time we talked so much about "Mother Earth" with all of its vital emotional meaning, and now we speak of "matter," which is totally devoid of emotional meaning and connection. As he says, "The function of symbolic language is to link consciousness to the roots of our being, and when that link is devalued or snapped, there is little left to unconsciously sustain the inner life of the individual."

This is a deep and often depressing read, and yet he manages to conclude it with a voice of hope and encouragement. His final chapter includes an imaginary speech delivered by a future US President to the nation. It is a powerful speech to read, and that alone may be worth pursuing this book.

Let me conclude this review with a concluding piece from this imaginary speech:

He begins with the normal greeting and then lays out the many blessings of the American experiment and frames the speech that he is giving as one that deals with the fact that today, with all of our material wealth and technology, "we all know that something disturbs the depths of the American spirit...and that it is his belief that we are facing the most difficult challenge that ever faced any generation...".

The President (in this imaginary scenario) then goes on to say, "...if we're going to have a workable global age, it cannot be simply a mechanical process. It must also be a human process, a psychological process, a spiritual process, a process of deepening consciousness and increasing sensitivity to other people and cultures. For common sense suggests that a unified world must be built on the solid foundation of a unified self in us as individuals. For each of us, this means we must take the time to deepen our inner life so that we are anchored in stabilizing realities as the storms of change blow ever more forcefully. There's no one way to achieve this, and each person must confront this need for himself or herself.

...In one sense, America is a laboratory for the world. No other nation has the mixture of races and nationalities entwined in its social fabric that we do. If we can find a way for people of differing ethnic backgrounds and religious viewpoints to build the

relationships and structures of a new time of our national journey, it can have a healing effect in areas of the world so torn by historical memories of bygone injustice.

...The tasks facing us require a level of care and effort usually reached by nations only in times of war. I do not exaggerate in saying we face the need for a sustained, selfless national effort. If we think we can meet the needs of this shift to a new era with a 'business as usual' approach, then we shall simply end up as one more powerful nation that had its day. The challenge confronting us demands a radical change in what has become our expectancy that life is an automatic cornucopia of endless entertainment and technological gadgets. It is not. Life is a struggle to find meaning and relevance beyond the daily sustenance requirements. There's only one place meaning comes from and that's from deep within the individual inner soul. Each of us has to fight for it and find it for ourselves."

He goes on to encourage the building of what he terms "the next phase of the American Experiment," which is based on a requirement to build fresh meaning for all of us. As he says, "We have the privilege to be living at a moment of unparalleled promise--perhaps the moment of greatest possibility the world has known. The Providence that brought America into existence and has given us such riches and power has now some new promise for America. It's a potential, however, that can be realized only if it's linked to the efforts of the rest of humanity to realize the promise also given them by Providence." It goes on to end in a beautiful Presidential style, familiar to our ears.

I'd love to hear this level of thinking from our leaders. I believe the voices are there today as Robert Greenleaf offers in *The Servant as Leader*, but we must seek them out. I encourage you to equip yourself with the learnings from Van Dusen Wishard. His very special voice represents one of the 'best' voices of America and lays out a blueprint for revival in this complex and dangerous era.