

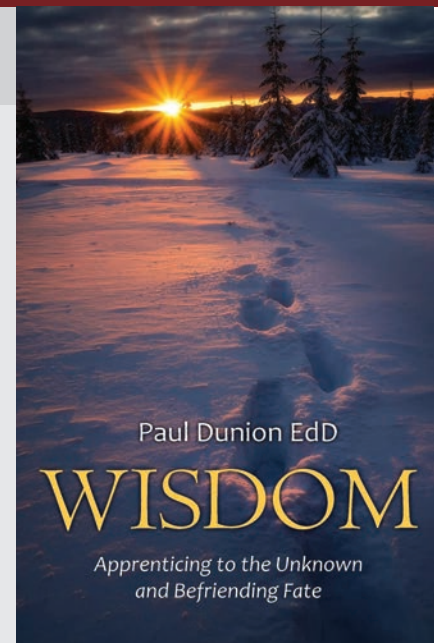
# Wisdom: Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate

A book excerpt by Mobius Transformational Faculty Member Dr. Paul Dunion

**At the 2022 Next Practice Institute Annual Gathering, Paul will lead the week-long track *Maturing the Masculine Soul*.**

Dr. Paul Dunion's *Wisdom* is a must read for anyone on a path of personal development or spiritual seeking. It is a handbook for a modern seeker who wishes their life to be infused with meaning, joy, closeness and devotion. It's precision, practicality and beauty are the fruits of Paul's lifetime exploring the human psyche, intimacy and attachment, and the embodied path of meeting the Mystery. This is a rare and sweeping look at where modern life places us away from immanent experience and inside a series of costly bypasses in habit, mindset and practices. At the same time, it is a beautifully articulated call to descend into life, encounter the nature of the forces that move and shape us, and enjoy the fruition of a life elevated by wisdom, compassion and love. I recommend this book for anyone wanting to address an addiction, repair a relationship, or apprentice themselves to a life-long journey of awakening.

—AMY ELIZABETH FOX, CEO, MOBIUS EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP



*I suggest you take this thoughtful book, obviously based on an intelligent, open-hearted willingness to live fully and courageously, and read it slowly. Write in the margins and empty spaces. Make it your own. See how each particle of the big picture applies to you. Don't over-intellectualize your life. Read the book the way it was written, distilling a livable philosophy of life out of a willingness to cooperate with what life wants from you.*

— From the Foreword written by Thomas Moore, author of the acclaimed *Care of the Soul* (1992)

## On Meandering

### From Chapter 1

It was late October, with the first frost heralding winter. I pulled into George's driveway, glad to be arriving for our regular 8:00 AM meeting in his basement office. The rural surroundings invited me

to let go of what seemed time-consuming and trivial. I entered his home through the front door, took off my shoes, and stepped upon a dark blue-and-gold Persian rug. There was something uplifting and regal about walking slowly across such a plush floor covering. The sight of George emerging from his office with a robust greeting only amplified this feeling.

"Good morning, good morning, my friend! I watched you walk from your vehicle to the house, looking very much like Alexander the Great crossing into Mesopotamia," cried George, once again offering unsolicited feedback regarding my persona.

"Well, I don't feel much like Alexander," I responded.

"Okay then, come in, and let's talk about this less-than-Alexander feeling of yours," George offered.

I took my regular seat: a beige leather chair with

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oak-grained armrests. George sat across from me in a large rocker that swayed in tune with his excitement. He was dressed in a blue denim shirt with a brown leather vest and a pair of baggy khakis. He leaned forward, ready to hear my truth.

“I’ve been committed to living a self-examined life, and I don’t feel closer to attaining any measure of wisdom or enlightenment. After all, I just turned fifty!” I proclaimed, attempting to convey my frustration and disillusionment, as if something might be wrong with the self-examined life itself as opposed to my deficient efforts in seeking it.

“It sounds like you’ve been on some kind of quest for wisdom and you’re not thrilled about the outcome,” George reflected.

“No, I’m not thrilled. I continue to make choices I regret. I hold some adolescent beliefs, and what’s really unfortunate is that I don’t ever seem to make any profound statements,” I continued, building a case for why I should be seeing more impressive results due to my investment in being wise.

“So, you want to make more profound declarations,” teased George, making no attempt to withhold his amusement.

“Come on, George, you know what I mean. What’s the use of attaining wisdom if you’re not able to demonstrate it and allow it to benefit others?” I suggested, attempting to bring a measure of altruism to a statement laden with a desire to impress.

“I really appreciate your willingness to gift humanity with your wisdom, and I’m sure there’ll be an outpouring of gratitude from the multitudes,” responded George, his soft tone failing to buffer the

jocularity and sarcasm revealed by the sparkle in his eyes.

“Okay, so maybe I don’t get why I haven’t acquired some level of wisdom. I don’t know how to make it happen,” I confessed.

“You don’t make it happen. It happens to you. You make yourself available to be touched, moved, and mindful of your experience. You’ll need to learn to let go of trying to get life right, and let it get you right instead. The gods willing, you may stumble more in the direction of enlightenment. However, you’ll first need to get accustomed to fumbling along a more circuitous route,” instructed George, bringing a more sober resonance to the conversation.

“Can you tell me more about being available and the purpose of fumbling along a circuitous route?”

“The key is to honor the meandering and not the arrival. There’ll be no arrival. Attachment to your arrival at some place of wisdom is simply another attempt to impress. Such an attachment will take you a long way from your truth and an even longer way from life as a sacred odyssey. Meandering loses its ability to teach anytime you judge a moment as falling short of your expectation. You’ll get lost because you turn your back on where you are now. Do that many times and you are many times lost. The journey becomes sacred when you live the questions of meandering rather than pretend you’re not lost or that the moment is somehow an unfortunate belch of life, signifying nothing because it doesn’t meet your expectations.”

George continued by suggesting that I live the questions that allow fate—defined here and throughout

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as the “will of the gods”—to teach me. “Questions of meandering include: What is here? How did I get here? What else is here? Who is here? How am I responding to this situation? What is this situation asking of me? Do I know how to be defeated by things larger than myself? Can I respond to these questions more honestly? And when you ask them, see if your responses carry adequate heart, measured by compassion, generosity, and gratitude. And then, ask these questions again and again. The path is circuitous, with ample opportunities to be distracted, get lost, and act foolishly. And you will get distracted, again and again. You’re only asked to be honest about your distraction while paying attention to the messages carried by the redundancy of your experience.

“Your ego will insist on being above such impediments. However, you’re asked to remain an apprentice of distractions, getting lost and acting foolishly along the way. Do that well, and you’ll be welcomed into an apprenticeship with the unknown,” offered George with no hint of condescension, leaving me touched by his encouragement.

“One more thing before you leave. Remember to remain an apprentice to defeat. It’s the best way to become acquainted with the contours and edges of your soul. You might learn where you begin and end. You might open to whatever invitations the gods are extending to you. Oh yes, make sure you greet the fool when you encounter him,” George added with a drop of his chin, his gaze sustaining a downward slant and his lips separating into a smile that baffled me.

“Why the fool?” I asked, hoping for a more uplifting suggestion.

“The fool because only he is willing to be seduced by fate and continue to meander, holding a kind of naïve faith that more will be revealed, even when feeling deeply lost. And you will get lost, again and again. **Fate is all that you encounter; it is the people, places, and events that constitute your outward experience. It is what you can call your life: your dance with fate and the destiny you create by such a dance,**” explained George.

Much time would pass before I began to understand the relationship between getting life wrong and living wisely.

That was the last time I saw George. He died shortly after that meeting. Like all good mentors, he enhanced my vision with his strengths and weaknesses alike. He was a bold man who sometimes stepped away from his limits, confident he could wrestle with life victoriously. George taught me that, in the quest to be rightsized, one must err in the direction of going too big and allow life to make the appropriate modifications. Slowly I learned that fate was not shy about modifying me. But first, I needed to befriend fate as its apprentice.

Life guarantees that we meander. It also guarantees that we get lost. If we can tolerate and be honest about being lost, then we may come to see being “lost” as the transition from old to new eyes. We are touched by genius.

Fate makes its strongest alterations by defeating us. Just as defeat can devastate us, so can it steer us away from where we do not belong, moving us in the right



Warm Valley by Jim McManus, Mobius Featured Artist

**“The basic contribution one can make to one's community is not to add to the general unconsciousness of the time.”**

— THOMAS MOORE

direction. The risks are inevitable. Yet fate favors those who show up in a big way, vulnerably placing our self-inflation in the hands of life's immensity. And from that place, life might get us right. We shall see that our fall from self-inflation may be what apprentices us to the unknown, making wisdom possible. Until this occurs, we must acknowledge how we get distracted from understanding ourselves and the journey on which we have embarked.

The ego knows how to build a case in favor of meandering. Efforts toward some success or achievement, as well as exhortations of being correct, will bring some credibility to the circuitous path, even if it is the only one initially available to us. What we encounter in our meandering informs us about the relationship we have with ourselves and with life. Each situation offers an opportunity to deepen our mindfulness of how we become distracted, lost, and ready to learn.

### **Letting the Banners Fly**

“Human events become trapped at the soul-starved surface of life where brief ashes of fame become a substitute for struggling to live the dreams inherent in one's soul. Narrow forms of egotism pass for accomplishment, and cleverness takes the place of genuine learning and the search for real knowledge” (Michael Meade). We can be distracted, marching while waving our banners in declaration of our achievements, knowledge, acquisitions, or pedigree.

This distraction can deepen as we grow obsessed with our own performance. Often, the desire to impress drives performance. When driven to impress, I do not really know who I am in your presence and I certainly do not know who you are in mine. In fact, I am not here to actually be with you in any meaningful

way. I am here simply to wow you and give myself a temporary respite from self-contempt.

Recently, over coffee, my friend looked at his watch and said, “I’ll need to get going soon. I want to catch up with my brother before he begins four months of silence.” I lost my breath and felt a bit numb. I moved toward my vehicle in a robotic fashion and drove two miles down the road before I realized how shallow my breath had become. My friend's words echoed within me, as if yelling into a steep canyon. Why was his brother's intention to remain silent for four months having such an impact on me?

Twenty-four hours later, I got it. I had scheduled the autumn months such that I would be dancing as fast as I could, my banners flapping wildly in the breeze. Could it be that my father's son was continuing to seek his father's blessing? When I thought of my father on the other side, separated from this earthly plane, I imagined his satisfaction and joy regarding who I was, with no need for me to win his favor. Was I waiting for the world to confirm my worth? The lifelong task of remaining responsible for my essential goodness was again knocking at the door.

Life was asking me to slow down and let go of an attachment to be chosen by someone or some organization outside of myself. I was being asked to remember that no one can hold our value the way we can, just as no one can really know us the way we can. It was helpful to hear a colleague say to me: “You’ve downloaded quite a bit of learning. If you don’t slow down, your rapid pace will be an impediment to wisdom.”

We must become mindful of an attachment to impression. We can begin by noticing how impressive we were in retrospect, without harsh judgment. The more we are able to notice an urgency in the moment to impress, the more choices we have. Having the choice to impress or not impress is empowering. Knowing



the need to impress is personally disempowering. I was convinced it would be no problem to simply interrupt my desire to arouse some favorable reaction. Time and time again, however, I felt a wave of heat gathering in my chest as an opportunity arose to stir an admiring gaze in my listener. I finally admitted that I was truly a novice when it came to laying down my banners.

I knew I did not want to grow old striving to move others toward perceiving me in some glowing fashion. It was simply too much work. I had repeatedly experienced the emptiness of walking away with flattering words drifting out of reach. Still, I occasionally allow myself to be seduced by a quick fix. The good news is that I seduce myself less often; and when I do succumb to a vigorous wave of my banners, I hear a voice within asking to be remembered and cared for.

Some questions can help to identify when we meander into being impressive: Where in my body do I feel the urgency to impress? What do I have to gain once someone is actually impressed? What is lost in my most impressive moments? What must take the place of my desire to impress? Lowering our banners becomes easier as we allow ourselves to feel the emptiness of striving to look good.

The emptiness that often follows banner waving is a good place to begin understanding the price of being impressive. The resounding hollowness of an impressive moment can be highly instructive. We step away not really seen, heard, or understood, and certainly not chosen in any meaningful way. Only in choosing to be authentic can we know the richness of

genuine connection and, possibly, deep belonging. We must be in the presence of another to be appreciated and loved. Our banners merely generate a moment of attention and possible fascination.

There is an immense gift in an apprentice's banner waving. In our efforts to impress, we are unable to fully take in our life experience. A profound settling accompanies the acceptance of our essential goodness. Such acceptance can give rise to a celebration of our gifts and accomplishments. We are not attempting to impress, but rather inviting the other to join us in our celebration.

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### Striving

Striving is the first cousin of performance. It can be extremely seductive and distracting since it is often camouflaged as either moral or spiritual laboring. Meandering in the embrace of striving may therefore go on for some time. No wonder that a root meaning of the word *strive* is "to quarrel."

Striving has a double edge. On the one hand, it may be quite helpful in allowing us to "quarrel" with contrived or artificial limits. We live within constricted margins, driven by fear and lethargy under the influence of striving. We become more of who we are meant to be by striving. Another perspective is that in our striving we are "quarreling" with our essential worth, determined to better ourselves. In the words of Sheldon Kopp: "I am no longer interested in character development, as long as that implies in any way that my Buddhahood is not already at hand."

## INSTEAD OF STRIVING WE CAN ...

- ▶ **Deepen personal acceptance of our wounds and our gifts.** We come to this planet, where we receive wounds and gifts. Our wounded caregivers pass on legacies of both psychological injury and strength. Wounds and gifts call us to the business of being fully human. The apprentice is asked to respond to fate with a renewed willingness to heal and learn every time. We remain open to the wound's request for healing and the gift's request for learning. We are asked to identify and develop our gifts, then allow them to serve others.
- ▶ **Remain curious about what fate is asking of us.** Fate must be treated like any person we care for. We are in constant relationships with the people, things, and events of fate. If we fail to be curious and caring about our experience with these materials of fate, we impede fate's ability to teach. Our apprenticeship with the unknown can be sabotaged indefinitely.

Kopp apparently understood the price of striving. He refused to toil in the mere interest of developing his character, as long as that suggested his goodness was not already present. Were he not presently accepting his goodness, his essential worth would continue to elude him. How many pure thoughts and noble deeds will it take?

Quarreling with our essential worth does not allow us to fully apprentice ourselves to the unknown as we meander freely in the grip of striving. Such feuding keeps us busy trying to get life right or get ourselves right. Living in pursuit of alleged betterment does not allow us to be informed by our wandering. Striving points us toward possibility and not what is. The

striver often feels the exhaustion and inadequacy of unfulfilled arrival, resulting in a posture of moral superiority. It sounds something like: "I must be

better than most folks. Look at how much I do!" Striving can be a compensation for shame. Each excessive act of fortitude, or so we tell ourselves, keeps us just one step ahead of the shame running us down.

We can interrupt the meandering of striving by becoming curious about our striving: How might I labor in a way that fosters growth,

without discrediting who I already am? It may be helpful to acknowledge that our soul's task is not to become better but to remove whatever obstructs the life of our uniqueness. ■

## Wounds and gifts call us to the business of being fully human.



**PAUL DUNION**, Mobius Transformational Faculty, Senior Expert, and track leader at the Next Practice Institute, earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at the University of Connecticut and Three Rivers Community College.

He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).