

## Quick-Start Guide

**Modern Life is for Nomads:** Through the internet and mass media, we know more and more about what happens all over the planet. At the same time, we may feel more helpless to do anything about it – rootless and unconnected. There seems to be no certainty, except for the certainty of change.

Ancient Middle Eastern peoples knew much about change, being nomads. The essence of their spirituality arose before settlement and civilization. They became experts in things like hospitality, interdependence and connection to the natural world. Within all the perpetual changes of life, they intuited and visioned stories and wisdom about what connects everything – an underlying and overarching Unity. This book shares some of that wisdom.

**Start Making Sense (of Your Self):** This is a source book of inspiration, spiritual practice and guidance. You don't need to read it straight through from beginning to end. It won't necessarily make more sense. Instead of offering easy answers (the strong suit of contemporary self-help books), **Desert Wisdom** offers better questions, questions to explore your self, the challenges you face in life and your deeper place in community with others. Better answers take time to surface, just as a plant takes time to grow. Like the internet, you can jump into the **Desert Wisdom** experience many different ways. Here are a few of them:

**The Big Questions:** I've organized the book by three areas of search that have united human experience since we began to form thoughts and words:

1. **Diversity:** Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?
2. **Interiority:** Who am I? What is the "self"?
3. **Communion:** How do I relate to other people, nature and my surroundings? How do I love and how do I die?

Within the big questions, the thirteen chapters of the book explore more questions and themes that relate to them. In the heading of each page, you'll find these themes and questions. This makes it possible to:

**Open Anywhere:** The Middle East also has a long tradition of using sacred writings as an oracle in order to assist you to hear the voice of your own guidance. So you can also simply place one hand gently over your heart and breathe a few breaths. Try asking to be led to the wisdom you need for the present moment, and then open to any page you find.

**Read Your Way Out:** Read the selections before and after the one to which you've opened. Maybe these also relate to the question in your heart. If you're searching this way, this is not the time to get side-tracked by the historical or textual notes. How do the voices to which you've been led speak to where you are *now*? Chances are you'll find a meditation somewhere near the pages you've found. This enables you to:

**Have Your Own Experience:** Along with the writings themselves, I have included short meditations typical of Middle Eastern spirituality to help

you explore the questions. The meditations use simple abilities common to all human beings: the awareness of our breathing, the feeling of internal sound, the ability to visualize and the sensation of our own voice.

**A Native Middle Eastern Search Engine:** Rather than divide the book by religious or spiritual tradition, I have gathered voices from various Middle Eastern eras to comment on the same questions. This creates a harmony of voices in which you can also hear the unique quality of each voice. The book sets each voice in its ecological or “home” context: the Middle Eastern environmental region, which generated the overall worldview which all these voices share.

Historically, some Middle Eastern voices (or interpretations of them) have been very influential in the development of Western culture. To acknowledge this, each chapter contains interpretive selections from Genesis of the Hebrew scriptures and from the words of Jesus, viewed in the Syriac Aramaic version, which most closely conveys his native language and thought. However, these Biblical voices, overly familiar to some, are translated as poetry with the multiple, possible meanings of the Hebrew or Aramaic layered into the verse or story.

**Entering a Different World, and Worldview:** Following in the footsteps of previous translators in the ethno-poetic world, I have attempted to translate the way a sacred or ritual text may have been “heard” originally. This means leaving behind Western cosmology and psychology for a primarily ancient Semitic one. Here you can enter a world in which mind,

body and spirit are not separate, in which “outer” and “inner” are always connected, and in which the relationship between humans, nature and the “sacred” is still interwoven.

**Many Voices, Layered Meaning:** To come closer to this world, many of the selections use multiple, layered translation-interpretations of the same passage, rather than a single one. This is part of a long tradition of Middle Eastern mystical interpretation, which is described in the preface and introduction. This tradition (called *midrash* in the Jewish tradition and *ta'wil* in the Islamic) asks you to wrestle with and meditate on various possible meanings of a saying in order to relate it to your own everyday life.

At the end of the book, you will find **Notes and Commentary** for each chapter that explore the basis for each translation-interpretation and provide additional links to other research.

**Forage for Wisdom:** Do you already know the spiritual tradition or type of meditation you're looking for? If so, two additional indexes allow you to search the book by tradition/textual strand or by the type of meditation, depending on your interest and inspiration.

**Explore the Bigger Picture:** The two **Prefaces** (new and old) describe what I feel to be the overall importance of the Middle East in the Western psyche.

The **Introduction** describes how I chose and organized the selections for the book and speaks in more detail about the translation/interpretation style and methods.

The **Appendix** relates the book's purpose to the ongoing search for peace in the Middle East and relates a peace plan first proposed by the American Sufi Murshid Samuel L. Lewis in the 1950's.

**Begin Now:** At this point, you are ready to search and use **Desert Wisdom**. You don't need to read all the context now. If you are familiar with other types of meditation and are ready for a direct experience with another world – one familiar and yet foreign – why not skip the rest of the introductory material and go directly to the first section, **Voices of Diversity?** Or close again and open anywhere!

## **Preface to the Second Edition**

Each time the Middle East surfaces in modern Western consciousness, it does so with increasing urgency.

Sixteen years ago, when I first published *Desert Wisdom*, it was already clear that the “Middle” or “Near” East represented more in modern Western culture than simply a vague geographical concept that embraces a conglomeration of conflicting religions, states and political problems. The Middle East had become a symbolic, and actual, source of energy – from the petrol at our fuel pumps to the despair-inducing headlines to the mythic ground out of which various religions and sects continually mine the spiritual energy to keep themselves going.

Over the past several generations, various solutions to the “problems” of the Middle East have been proposed. Some voices have declared all-out cultural war on the area and its peoples, the so-called “clash of civilizations” approach. Others voices (political and military) have intervened forcibly in the affairs of various Middle Eastern countries – countries which, after all, were simply the creations of the Western powers themselves after World War I. Still others have declared religion itself to be the problem and proposed a new heaven on earth based on the complete de-spiritualization and secularization of the cosmos.

In 1995, I waded into this conflicted arena with an attempt to show the common ground of Middle Eastern visionary voices on the basis of ecology, that is, a shared home based on environment (northern extension of the

“Great Rift Valley”) and cosmology (shared stories of origin and destination, primarily in Semitic language). In 1995, ardent religionists unwilling to find common ground with “other” religions accused me of glossing over differences between religions. Simultaneously, ardent secularists who felt that scientific cosmology would be the “gospel” of the modern age accused me of attempting to redeem the energy in what was (or should be) a dead institution (religion). On a practical level, most bookstores refused to stock the book because they had nowhere to shelve it. In 1995, the “Religion” section in most stores still included only Christianity, or at a stretch, Judaism. “Native Traditions” included only indigenous spiritualities of everywhere *except* the Middle East. If a book concerned Middle Eastern spirituality, it had to be about organized religion, so a book that talked about a “native Middle Eastern tradition” often ended up stacked on the floor (a circumstance I witnessed several times when I showed up for a bookstore reading).

The “problem” of the Middle East – in politics, religion, psychology (and book publishing) has not vanished, nor does it promise to do so anytime soon. At the same time, I believe that the arguments for the approach of *Desert Wisdom* remain as strong today as when I began the book almost twenty years ago. The key features of this approach are:

**Ecology:** All human religious and spiritual experiences arise from an embodied relationship with the environment and nature. These *natural* experiences produce vision, ritual, story and sacred text. Religion organizes or “colonizes” these experiences, increasingly, though often unwittingly, as the

province of experts (a clerical, legal, academic or administrative class).

Similarly, the natural human impulse to produce music and move in rhythm or dance has gradually been colonized as performing arts – an audience listening to or watching expert professionals, first live, now increasingly virtually.

**Vision and Ritual:** Vision and ritual go hand in hand. We can understand them on their own terms, not in terms of the later development of written texts, theologies and legal interpretations, organizations, bureaucracies and political hierarchies. I have expanded more on this below.

**Big Questions:** Vision and ritual naturally arise from questions basic to the human experience: Where do we come from? Where are we going? Who are we? How do we relate to “others”? What is our place in the natural world? How do we “die” and what happens then? All of these questions are posed first in the plural, as a community question, and only progressively over the past two millennia in the singular, as a question for the individual.

In much of my scholarly work since *Desert Wisdom*, I have argued for the primacy of spiritual vision and experience over later cultural developments of them, including institutional theologies. The former cannot be defined by the latter any more than the sense of smell can be defined by Chanel No. 5.

For example, most academic writers on ritual and myth take it for granted that ritual arises out of myth, as an enactment or performance of a previous story. I maintain it was more likely the other way around.



For instance, in many Native Middle Eastern spiritual traditions, the first spiritual practice was said to be “naming.” In one of the Genesis stories, the first human being with self-reflexive consciousness breathes with and names its relationship to all other beings. This becomes the first form of sound practice or chant. From this chanting/naming, music arises, which has to do with hearing the overtones of sound resonating with our bodies, and connecting us to nature and the cosmos. Several mystics later called this phenomenon the “symphony of the spheres,” but scientists have only recently begun to explore the neuropsychology and psychological acoustics of the phenomena. A deeper, more embodied, empowered sense of sound naturally leads to movement and to group and individual dance. Or, breathing with the natural world in a deeper, more intensely related way can lead to art, which can be both representational as well as abstract. It can also lead to healing, in the way that shamans were able to communicate with the plant world, a phenomena that survives to the present day in medicines like the Bach Flower remedies. Early ritual, art and healing all arises from somatic (embodied) experiences, either with another being or with the larger cosmos.

Combinations of contemplation, chant, song, art, movement and healing become ritual. People often remember collective rituals by various stories being told around them, but story is the final, narrative, verbal stage of a non-verbal, highly somatic relationship to the cosmos. Stories also help to place these somatic relationships and experiences in relation to the “big questions” mentioned above.

In light of the above, the methods of the Desert Wisdom project remain valid for understanding not only the Middle East, but also ourselves (and what the “Middle East” represents within us).

**Retranslation:** I have retranslated Middle Eastern wisdom texts from the past five thousand years as visionary experiences, as one might the ritual poetry of other cultures. In this regard I follow in the footsteps of poets like Jerome Rothenberg (1967, 1984, *Technicians of the Sacred*) and Robert Bly (many works, including *Eight Stages of Translation*). In the preface to the first edition of his pioneering work in ethnopoetics, Rothenberg writes:

#### PRIMITIVE MEANS COMPLEX

That there are no primitive languages is an axiom of contemporary linguistics where it turns its attention to the remote languages of the world. There are no half-formed languages, no underdeveloped or inferior languages.... What is true of language in general is equally true of poetry & of the ritual-systems of which so much poetry is a part. It is a question of energy & intelligence as universal constants &, in any specific case, the direction that energy & intelligence (=imagination) have been given. No people today is newly born. No people has sat in sloth for the thousands of years of its history. Measure everything by the Titan rocket & the transistor radio, & the world is full of primitive peoples. But once change the unit of value to the poem or the dance-event or the dream (all clearly antifactual situations) & it becomes apparent what all those people have been doing all those years with all that time on their hands (punctuation as in original, 1967, p.xxv).

**Multi-leveled Versions:** In the West, only some Middle Eastern voices have been considered “primitive.” Others have been considered, through the lens of Western philosophy and theology, as the only source of truth and civilization. These voices need “re-hearing,” allowing the richness of expression originally there to burst the strait-jackets of institutionalization. In the ancient Middle Eastern Semitic languages, the distinction between what we call cosmology – our place in the universe – and psychology – our inner state, did not exist. When cosmology meets psychology, then the way we treat ourselves is the way we treat nature and those around us. And vice versa. The root-and-pattern system of Semitic languages makes possible an approach similar to what is called *midrash* in the Jewish mystical tradition and *ta'wil* in the Islamic one: hearing each statement or story in a multi-leveled way, with all possible meanings of the various Semitic words included.

**A Text Organized by the Big Questions:** This allows one to neither force nor ignore similarities. The human questions unite us. The diversity of answers are causes for celebration rather than dismay, or even worse, the colonization of fear into structures of political and religious power.

If any of this is true, then we cannot expect to find common answers to problems or create new rituals from an already fixed text of either an old mythic or a new scientific story. Ancient visions and stories, as well as an increased appreciation of our shared ecological challenges, can help us find our way.

In my view, we need to enter states of somatic awe – “unknowing” rather than knowing – in relationship to the cosmos. We can cultivate such numinous states of awareness through traditional spiritual practices from all parts of the earth. These practices center on abilities common to all human beings, primarily the awareness of breathing, tone/sound and other somatic sensation. They can lead us to unmediated experiences of the “voice” of the universe, as it came through our original human encoding, before it was modified by some unhelpful habits of modern culture. As many stories propose, perhaps we can hear the voice of the Being or Consciousness behind the universe, as it speaks to our problems now.

As we enlarge the awareness of our relationship to each other in a still larger, now sacred cosmos, we can name and re-name these relationships in new, shared ritual. We may discover that old and new forms of music, dance, ceremony and healing arise to weave together new and old stories, creating shared celebrations diverse enough to include all the cultures of the earth and vibrant enough to sustain coming generations.

–Neil Douglas-Klotz, January 2011