

"This is the kind of book you can't put
down because it is so necessary."

—Alexandra Fuller, author of
Cocktail Hour under the Tree of Forgetfulness

PERSPECTIVE

THE CALM WITHIN THE STORM



ROBERT J. WICKS

Author of *Bounce: Living the Resilient Life*

PERSPECTIVE



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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *PERSPECTIVE:
THE CALM WITHIN THE STORM*

This is the kind of book you can't put down because it is so necessary: gentle, wise, erudite advice on how to slow down and notice the uncertainty and beauty of life. I read it in one hungry helping, underlining frantically, phoning up friends to read them quotes. I know that I will return to it often.

ALEXANDRA FULLER

AUTHOR, *Cocktail Hour under the Tree of Forgetfulness*

Dr. Wicks unlocks the secret to achieving the fullest potential in each of us. I wish I had read this book 30 years ago and had assigned it to everyone under my command. Perspective: The Calm within the Storm guides us to be more positive, focused, and open-minded—shaping a state of mind where each of us will succeed!

MIKE GOULD, LIEUTENANT GENERAL (RETIRED), USAF
SUPERINTENDENT, UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY,

JUNE 2009-AUGUST 2013

Robert Wicks leads us on an inward exploration designed to foster our own personal journey toward enlightenment by opening the door to pathways for living and being that have always been there right before our eyes, but perhaps previously not readily accessible to us. Wicks opens these doors for the willing participant, offering us the possibility of achieving our full potential and living life more richly, in a more rewarding, fulfilling, and meaningful manner.

The key is to join him on this journey of perspective that he masterfully leads within the pages of this book.

JEFFREY E. BARNETT, PSY.D., ABPP

PAST PRESIDENT, DIVISION OF PSYCHOTHERAPY,

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Robert Wicks has written a truly remarkable book for leading a more meaningful, balanced, resilient life. His ability to tie together and apply different theories, including those related to mindfulness, positive psychology, cognitive behavioral therapy, happiness, and posttraumatic growth is very impressive. Dr. Wicks skillfully draws from these perspectives to provide realistic, practical strategies that we all can use to adopt a more positive, healthy outlook and lifestyle. He does so in a reader-friendly, nonjudgmental, empathic manner, which makes it easier to understand, appreciate, and apply his ideas. This book will be read and re-read by those seeking to experience a life that is more enriching and purposeful. It will also serve as a valuable resource by therapists/counselors both in their professional and personal lives.

ROBERT BROOKS, PH.D., FACULTY, HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL; CO-AUTHOR, *The Power of Resilience*

This book is a lovely, clear, and inspiring read. Using personal examples combined with the insights of Eastern spiritual traditions and clinical psychology, the author guides the reader through easy-to-follow steps to develop a healthier perspective on life.

KRISTIN NEFF, PH.D.
AUTHOR, *Self-Compassion*; ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR,
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

Perspective: The Calm within the Storm is the type of gift that keeps giving. Wherever you are on your journey, this book is your perfect companion. I feel wiser and richer because of it. My wish for you is a willingness to receive and start reading in order to discover the tools you need to create your own umbrella to weather the storms that come with life.

FRANCOISE ADAN, M.D.
MEDICAL DIRECTOR, CONNOR INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE
NETWORK, UNIVERSITY HOSPITALS

PERSPECTIVE

THE CALM WITHIN THE STORM

ROBERT J. WICKS

Author of Bounce: Living the Resilient Life

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For Sue and Doug Ferraro, whose faithful friendship, compassionate presence, natural wisdom, and great sense of humor continue to inspire and help me gain a healthier sense of perspective

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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PEARL OF GREAT
PRICE: A PROLOGUE

*Wish not for wealth or power
but for the passion of possibility,
for the eye, eternally young,
eternally ardent, that sees
possibility everywhere.*

SØREN KIERKEGAARD, *Either/Or*

When someone gains or regains a healthy sense of perspective, it feels like pure magic. The person sees more clearly and experiences greater freedom. Unforeseen possibility surfaces. New peace and joy are seeded.

The situation hasn't changed. Unwanted occurrences aren't denied or minimized: Instead, they are faced and explored differently—not with unrealistic expectations or the projection of blame, harshness, or self-recrimination, but with a sense of *intrigue*. There is a realization that whatever “darkness,” suffering, confusion, or potentially addictive attraction may be present in the moment, it is not the end of the story. It is not the last word.

And so, having the passion and tools to continually seek out a healthier perspective is not simply a good idea. No, it is much more than that. It is actually a determining factor as to how life can be enjoyed more completely and shared more fully every minute of one's day. Having a healthy perspective is tantamount to possessing the psychological pearl of great price. Yet, as we shall see, this "pearl" may not be what we think it is.

THE CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY CALL TO HONOR PERSPECTIVE

Knowing the importance of perspective, recognizing more quickly when its guiding sense has temporarily slipped from our hands, and having the energy to seek it anew represents the key to a happy, meaningful, and naturally compassionate life. Classic and contemporary psychology have long known this and sought to provide potent portals to perspective. Psychology also now points to the findings of both quantitative and qualitative studies to assist in appreciating what really works in the search for a healthy perspective. Intense interest in the search for a way to open ourselves to life—which is enhancing yet often elusive—didn't begin with the behavioral sciences.

Encouragement to live life as a continual pilgrimage in search of a perspective that opens us up to life in new and renewing ways (so we don't get trapped in trivial or unhelpful cultural norms) begins with the early wisdom literature. For instance, in

the *Talmud* we are cautioned, “You do not see things as they are. You see things as *you* are.” In the Christian *New Testament* we read, “If your eye is good, your whole body will be good” (Matt. 6:22). The Buddhists speak about a true perspective as the unobstructed vision, and the Hindus refer to it in the *Upanishads* as a turning around in one’s seat of consciousness.

Even in the brief maxims or sayings of ancient religious leaders, we see this call to let go, see differently, and live with greater dignity—even in the smallest actions of our life. For example, we can feel the theme of perspective breathing behind the urging of the Prophet Muhammad when he once reportedly quipped, “If you have enough money to buy two loaves of bread, buy only one, and spend the rest on flowers.”

Perspective, how we view ourselves and the world, makes all the difference in what the contours of our life will look like—no matter what the external circumstances turn out to be. So, it is no wonder, then, that a healthy perspective (also known as “enlightenment,” “purity of heart,” “the secret to a well-lived life”) is sought with such dedication by some. And to have such passion is certainly one of the most important prerequisites for finding this pearl of great price. This is so because it enables us to persevere with tenacity—even during the dark days that every one of us must experience as part of being human.

Contemplative and well-known writer Thomas Merton knew this. And so, when he encountered a much older fellow monk who seemed quite depressed and temporarily disconnected

from his usual outlook as to what life should be like (what we are calling a “healthy perspective”), he knew what to do and say to him. In response to his companion’s lament that he felt he was losing his way, his spirit, his very energy of life, Merton simply responded by gently putting his hand on the sad man’s shoulder, smiling at him and advising him (and *us* today when we are going through tough times, I think):

Brother, courage comes and goes. Hold on for the next supply.

But as we look at such simple wisdom, we see that determination and passion—even with their admittedly great value in the search to gain or regain a healthy perspective—do not represent the total answer. We can have all the energy in the world and be with like-minded searchers but be going very speedily in the *wrong* direction. This is beautifully put forth in the following dialogue between a Zen Master and a would-be disciple. It is a fine and telling example of Buddhist mentorship that can be found reflected in so many similar ways in current psychotherapy and coaching relationships.

The disciple asks: “Master, how long will it take me to find enlightenment if I enter your community?”

The Master, without hesitating, responds: “Ten years.”

The disciple, who is clearly shaken by the time involved, pauses to reflect, looks earnestly up at the Master and pleads, “Well, what if I work really hard?”

“Ah, then,” the Master replies, “*twenty* years.”

And so, as Clark Strand reminds us in his book *The Wooden Bowl*, removing the blocks to gaining a healthy perspective is a bit like trying to rid oneself of a boomerang. If we have only passion and motivation, we may seek to achieve our goal by trying to throw it away—sometimes with great gusto! But to do so would lead to obvious unsatisfactory results. However, with the right knowledge, we will know when and how to simply set something down in the correct, often gentle, way. Then, like the boomerang we wish to rid ourselves of, we can simply step over it and move on with our lives in a more fruitful way.

POTENT PSYCHOLOGICAL PORTALS TO GAINING A HEALTHIER PERSPECTIVE

From its inception, psychology has also been interested in perspective and saw the value in freeing people from the chains of distorted thinking. In Freud's writings and those of his followers to this day, for example, we see a concern about how we may inadvertently transfer onto the present a way of seeing the world and a resultant style of coping learned in the past—even when the fit is far from perfect. In such instances, according to Freudian thinking, people transfer onto, and live out in, the present what they could not remember from the past. As a result, they have a distorted view of reality and less than satisfactory personal and interpersonal outcomes.

Later on, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and schema therapy focused on helping people gain greater clarity and a more accurate perception of what was happening. Instead of psychoanalysis and psychodynamic psychotherapy's concern with the past, they are instead interested in the present. They see negative moods as a tip-off that people need to examine their cognitions (ways of perceiving, thinking, and understanding) so they could look further at their underlying beliefs, which are often held without valid support. The goal is to challenge beliefs that are sometimes held with or without clear awareness that prove to be, on closer examination, patently false or, at the very least, somewhat distorted.

Another approach that has now essentially slipped from the center stage of popular psychology is transactional analysis (TA), which was popular in the 1970s. It focuses on helping people to become aware of the games they play, so they can implement changes that result in more fruitful interactions.

And so, if we do value openness and clarity, the obvious question that remains for us to address now—the subject at the heart of this book—is this:

What are some of current psychology's most potent portals to gaining, regaining, and maintaining a healthy perspective in order to lead us to deeper personal wisdom and a more meaningful, satisfying, and compassionate life?

In response to this, in scanning modern clinical psychology's offerings on how to—in practical, concrete ways—improve our sense of reality and acceptance of it, in an effort to make the

most of this brief journey we call “life,” we find a number of approaches offered that are countercultural and habit-breaking. These include the psychology of “mindfulness,” positive psychology and narrative therapy, the modern psychology of gratefulness and happiness, the helpful lessons from studies on posttraumatic *growth*, the psychology of overcoming resistances to openness and change, and techniques in the daily debriefing of self from the schools of cognitive-behavioral therapy and schema therapy as well as the critical thinking and spiritual discernment literature. They are especially important to gaining, regaining, or maintaining a healthy perspective because they encourage us to

- be more nonjudgmental and aware, or psychologically “mindful”;
- expand the narrative we have of ourselves or the ones that have been imposed on us;
- understand how to personally debrief ourselves and use structured reflection to see the heretofore unrecognized schemas (beliefs) that may be serving as invisible puppeteers in our lives;
- make “friends” with the resistances to openness so they can atrophy and make room for new possibilities;
- introduce ourselves to the especially helpful aspects of the new psychology of gratefulness and happiness and the ancient wisdom underlying it; and
- see that trauma and the significant stresses that all of us experience need not be the end of the story or the final word, but a source of new meaning making in life.

Seeing these psychological portals to expanding our perspective can be quite a pilgrimage in health and lead to a greater appreciation for so much that is already present, yet so easy to miss, in ourselves and our environment. It would be a shame to avoid the garden of knowledge they provide and ignore the invitation to fathom these portals in today's anxious world. If we are honest, often there is still a hesitancy to see clearly, and act accordingly, as well as to become freer and healthier in how we view our lives and the world around us.

Of such blocks, possibly the main resistance to doing so may be a fear that the work involved in seeking out a healthier perspective is just too hard and time-consuming for us in our already overwrought schedule. Yet, when challenged about all that might be involved in such a pursuit, one mentor retorted with the following simple, challenging question: "How much effort does it take to open your eyes *to see?*"

This question becomes all the more compelling when we start to realize the extent to which the way we view things determines how much more we can enjoy our lives and freely share them with others—*no matter how challenging and dark the circumstances may be!* This is so because a healthy perspective promises so much in realistic immediate terms. In essence:

A Healthy Perspective . . .

- *Doesn't remove the pain . . . it limits unnecessary suffering.*
- *Doesn't prevent us from blaming others . . . it has us withdraw our projections and reclaim our power more quickly.*

- *Doesn't see only what we wish to see... it allows us to better encounter everything that we must face to move forward in life.*
- *Doesn't help us run away from the truth... it enables us to put things in their proper place.*
- *Doesn't eliminate sadness... it allows us to deepen and learn from it.*
- *Doesn't necessarily enable us to be effective when we are compassionate... it helps us to realize that being faithful to reaching out (rather than being successful) is what is truly important.*
- *Doesn't aid us in obtaining more possessions to be happy... it teaches us that real happiness allows us to see all that is there already present in our lives that we are yet to fully enjoy.*
- *Doesn't concern itself so much with the "mental menus" of life's offerings in the future... it aids us to be more present and attentive to exacting the essence out of the real "meals" already set before us.*
- *Doesn't deny the terror of life's traumas... instead it helps us to avoid being permanently crushed as well as to find surprising lessons that might not have been possible to learn had terrible things not happened in the first place.*
- *Doesn't ask us to surrender our intelligence... it encourages us to guard our use of thinking so that emotional and intuitive experiences are valued and examined carefully.*
- *Doesn't solely seek stimulus, novelty, and group experiences... it recognizes the equal importance of periods of solitude, silence, and enjoying the "crumbs of alonetime" available to us.*
- *Doesn't accept our current story or the reputation we may presently have with ourselves... it opens us up to a larger self-narrative that is not determined by society, family, mores, history, or misfortune, but by us.*

- *Doesn't answer all our needs . . . but instead calls us to re-evaluate and change the way we live by learning what is truly important and meaningful in life.*

And so, in helping us appreciate all of this more readily, we begin to see that being able to gain, regain, or maintain a healthy perspective is, indeed, the pearl of great price.

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new
landscapes, but in having new eyes.*

MARCEL PROUST, *La Prisonnière*

PSYCHOLOGICAL PORTALS TO
EXPERIENCING A HEALTHIER
PERSPECTIVE



ONE

A TIME TO SEE

Creating Space for a More Mindful Life

*Is there a quiet stream underneath the fluctuating affirmations
and rejections of my little world? Is there a still point where my
life is anchored and from which I can reach out with hope and
courage and confidence?*

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN, *The Genesee Diary*

*Mindfulness is simply about being aware of where your mind is
from one moment to the next, with gentle acceptance. This kind
of simple attention can have a deeply transformative effect on our
daily lives. We can learn to enjoy very ordinary things, such as
the flavor of an apple, tolerate great hardship, such as the death of
a loved one, just by learning to be aware.*

CHRISTOPHER K. GERMER, RONALD D. SIEGEL, AND
PAUL R. FULTON, *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*

When a new, healthier perspective is gained, it may be filled with promise that previously wasn't present. At the very least, it can help us to lessen the unnecessary worry and rumination that may be presently dissipating the limited energy at our disposal.

Yet, to be in such a position to gain a broader, healthier perspective, a time for inner stillness is essential—even if it occurs

when we are surrounded by people, noise, and the stimulations that seem to sap our spirit and occupy our minds each day. During a lecture trip to Japan, I learned this quite vividly in such a captivating way from a gentle, insightful man.

I had completed delivering a series of lectures in Tokyo and was asked whether I was interested in visiting one of the holiest Shinto shrines in southern Japan: *Ise Jingu*. I was intrigued even more by the possibility of doing this when I heard I would receive a personal tour from a former woodsman who was now the director of the temple grounds. His comments were to be translated for me by someone who spoke both English and Japanese and who had also taught his children.

When my interpreter and I arrived, he met us at the gate and we bowed to each other in traditional Japanese fashion. The tour involved a careful and sensitive explanation of the symbolism and rituals that marked the seasons and life of the tranquil temple grounds and those who visited them.

Amidst this tour and narrative, he led us up to the top of a slightly arched, simply but carefully carved wooden bridge. He then stopped and urged me to look down at the water. When I did, he asked, "What do you see?" After a moment I responded, "Water that is clear, fresh, and at peace." To which he smiled and responded, "*Hai*" (Yes.) Then he looked at me directly with his dark brown eyes, an intent expression on his face, and asked this time, "Now, what do you *hear*?" After another pause, I thought I could make out the sound of a small frog and told him so.

“*Abso*,” he responded and then with a very serious expression added, “you will not hear *this* species of frog anywhere else on the temple grounds but here.” And when I asked why, he quietly but clearly said, “Because this species of frog only lives near water that is clear, fresh, and calm.”

I knew enough of the animistic nature of Shintoism to realize that he was not really speaking about frogs and water, but my style of living and the opportunities (or lack of them) that this very style would provide. Would I have periods of silence and possibly solitude to truly experience calm, clarity, and peace, or would I just rush through my life and feel that doing so was “practical,” “natural,” and “necessary”? After all, doesn’t everyone live that way?

Much later, naturalist Peter Matthiessen wrote a similar reflection in a section of his book *Nine-Headed Dragon River*. It made me think back to the above experience and carried the point deeper for me as Matthiessen shared the following comments of spiritual master Yasutani-Roshi

“The mind of a buddha,” Yasutani once said, “is like water that is calm, deep, and crystal clear, and upon which ‘the moon of truth’ reflects fully and perfectly. The mind of the ordinary man, on the other hand, is like murky water, constantly being churned by the gales of delusive thought and no longer able to reflect the moon of truth. The moon nonetheless shines steadily upon the waves, but as the waters are roiled, we are unable to see its reflection. Thus we