



WISE DEMOCRACY'S MOST FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE

Tom Atlee

I devised the idea of wise democracy to help us "evoke and engage the wisdom and resourcefulness of the whole on behalf of the whole." ("That's nice," you say, "but what does that actually mean?") In this essay I explore why I consider that statement to be wise democracy's "prime directive". In the process, I tease out the specific relevance and power of each of its main constituent words - paying special attention to the vast and many-faceted concept of "the whole" which lies at its heart.

INTRODUCTION

If you wish to grasp one of the most fundamental principles and drivers in all my work, I invite you to reflect on what I've written here. If you are looking for a quick fix, I'm afraid this won't be it. This longish essay is a detailed exploration of what I've lately been calling "the prime directive"* of wise democracy. This directive seems to be fundamental to co-intelligence and evolutionary activism, as well.

The prime directive says that the mission of wise democracy is "to evoke and engage the wisdom and resourcefulness of the whole on behalf of the whole".

In this essay I explore what that statement means. I briefly go over definitions of the familiar terms "evoke", "engage", "wisdom" and "resourcefulness". Then I explore in greater depth five main aspects of what I mean by the less commonly understood phrase "the whole". These include:

1. The whole thing – the whole community, situation, or system being considered, and all the capacities people bring (or can bring) to it;
2. The whole context – all the surrounding factors that shape what's going on;
3. Holistic attitudes – especially the humility to realize there's always more to it than we realize;
4. Wholeness itself – the qualities that make wholes more than mere collections of parts; and
5. Ultimate realities that embrace, permeate and transcend all of existence.

I see these five as dimensions of an elusive but potent reality I'm calling "the whole". I'm suggesting that when we wish to truly serve life, we need to involve ourselves with the whole both in what we are trying to do and in how we seek to do it. This is the instruction and motivation conveyed by the most fundamental commandment of wise democracy – its prime directive that we seek to evoke and engage the wisdom and resourcefulness of the whole on behalf of the whole.

***We seek to evoke and engage the wisdom and resourcefulness
of the whole on behalf of the whole***



WHY AND HOW THIS IS WISE DEMOCRACY'S "PRIME DIRECTIVE"

We choose to be led by this prime directive because we need and want the right wisdom to discern what will bring the most benefit to all beings, communities and systems... and because we need and want the resourcefulness to enable that wisdom to have actual influence in the real world. The more of the whole we can engage in this collective mission, the more insight and capacity will become available, thus helping to bring about the greatest good over the longest term.

Every pattern in the Wise Democracy Pattern Language is a window into this prime directive and provides guidance on how to pursue it. But when the prime directive itself seems unclear, the pattern language can seem like a random collection of disconnected ideas and suggestions. So what follows in this essay is a detailed exploration of what I mean by key terms in this fundamental principle so that the underlying meaning, coherence and potency of the pattern language can be better appreciated and put into practice.

EVOKE AND ENGAGE

The word "evoke" in the wise democracy prime directive means to bring into being what is already present in potential form. With this in mind, the commandment to "evoke" means to stimulate, enable, awaken, call forth, or catalyze the latent wisdom and resourcefulness we need. It is more about energizing and liberating than about forcing or building.

"Engage" means to bring into action and operation the wisdom and resourcefulness that have been called forth and catalyzed. Engagement here means to invite and facilitate that newly available wisdom and resourcefulness to play their best roles in our efforts to generate long-term broad benefits.

Underlying my choice of these two words is my experience, vision, and ideal of an almost alchemical or Taoistic dynamic through which desirable effects may be generated with little or no investment of outside energy. Instead, such effects occur through a depth of understanding and resonant interaction that welcomes existing energies into co-creative partnerships for mutually beneficial ends. Aikido, improvisational jazz and permaculture are exemplars of that dynamic.

This is worth reiterating: The words "evoke" and "engage" tell us that the wisdom and resourcefulness we want already exists, largely hidden or trapped beneath the dysfunctional patterns of business-as-usual. Bringing these suppressed capacities into partnership on behalf of the whole requires a discerning and welcoming spirit and a capacity for brilliant design that frees their life energy to participate wholeheartedly in creating positive impact. Although the energy that drives their appearance and functioning is largely contained within them, the catalytic factors we introduce can help release, align and magnify their ultimate contribution.



WHAT IS WISDOM?

Thinking generically about wisdom, we can explore a good sampling of mainstream perspectives in the [Wikipedia article](#). A [survey](#) I did on the subject provides some deep perspectives from a community equally grounded in spiritual and scientific worldviews. I also offer a good sampling of [co-intelligence perspectives](#) about the nature of wisdom in these essays.

But while these diverse definitions of and perspectives on wisdom can inform us, wise self-governance calls for a more practical definition that supports our social design efforts and allows us to track how wise we are collectively being as we go. So for the purposes of wise democracy theory and its associated pattern language, we say that **wisdom involves taking into account what needs to be taken into account for long-term broad benefit.**

The elements of this definition - especially "long-term", "broad", and "benefit" - are not clear, solid realities so much as general principles appropriately subject to shared exploration, discernment, and ongoing evolution. This is quite similar to the way other democratic principles like "liberty", "justice", "equality", and "the pursuit of happiness" are continuously debated in political discourse. The ongoing clarification and evolution of such concepts is fundamental to the evolution and health of democracy itself.

So our wise democratic vision tells us that in our individual and collective activities, policies and plans, we should never stop asking if we are adequately taking into account what needs to be taken into account in order to produce long-term broad benefits. As circumstances change, this question needs to be asked again and again, suggesting that wisdom is more a flexible capacity and an ongoing journey than a static attribute or achievement.

WHAT IS RESOURCEFULNESS?

Like "wisdom", "resourcefulness" has many definitions that highlight its different aspects. Here are several I found in a recent web search:

- *The ability to meet situations, to devise ways and means.*
- *The ability to act effectively or imaginatively, especially to act with initiative in challenging situations.*
- *The ability to skillfully and promptly deal with new situations, difficulties, etc.*
- *The ability to use the means at one's disposal to meet situations effectively.*
- *The ability to overcome problems or to make do with what is available to create a solution.*
- *The capacity to find ways of solving difficulties, problems, etc..*

Taking all these definitions into account for my wise democracy prime directive, **I use "resourcefulness" to mean the ability to realize, generate and apply whatever resources and capacities are needed - especially those that are non-obvious or which are difficult to bring into play.** Resourcefulness is most notable in situations that are challenging - for example, when situations are unexpected, unprecedented, difficult, complex, or urgent.



I chose “resourcefulness” rather than “resources” because wise democracy can ultimately only be manifested through creative action and results, not just by having resources available. And we are speaking here not only of our resourcefulness but the resourcefulness of “the whole”.

Grounded in this sense of what I mean by wisdom and resourcefulness, let us now explore what I mean by “the whole”...

WHAT IS “THE WHOLE”?

The phrase “the whole” defies simple definition. But we need to comprehend it because there are critical links between wisdom and resourcefulness and “the whole”:

When we relate to something as a whole or explore it as a whole, we have access to more dimensions, qualities and capacities than when we treat it as a collection of separate parts or aspects – or, worse yet, when we mindlessly attend to only a few of those parts or aspects as if they constituted the whole picture. In this case, “the whole” also includes the qualities and capacities of wholeNESS itself – the factors that make many parts or aspects into a whole. And of course the special capacities of the whole and wholeness constitute the “resourcefulness of the whole” that is referred to in the prime directive.

I say more on all this in the five sections below. But keep in mind that “the whole” eludes even this level of articulation, and that it behooves us to continue to humbly deepen our understanding of its nature and our ability to act on that understanding.

1. “The Whole” as “The Whole Thing”: Who and what do we include?

For simplicity in our thinking about wise democracy, our first concern regarding “the whole” is to impartially (a provocative word in this context!) include whole communities, whole systems, whole situations. We can ask: ***Who or what is involved in creating the situation we’re addressing and who and what needs to be included to resolve it, to move it in positive directions or to engage with it in ways that benefit all life?***

We are thinking here of agents - of people, groups, and factors that influence – or are impacted by – whatever is going on or might happen. The assumption here is that the more of such agents we can truly include in our consideration and our implementation efforts, the more wise and successful we are likely to be.

Two potent questions often used to attend to this are ***Do we have the whole system in the room?*** and ***Who else should be part of this conversation?*** Some efforts to include “all stakeholders” define stakeholders as “the people involved in the issue or situation” – meaning those who are impacted by it and by any decision about it, as well as those who have roles, power, information, or other resources that shape or could shape what happens next.

Wise approaches to including “the whole” tend to highlight impacts on marginalized people, future generations, non-human beings and other often-overlooked stakeholders. We don’t want just “the usual suspects” and “what everybody knows”. And, since it is usually impossible to include everyone and everything involved, efforts to include “the whole” often focus on



gathering the diversity of those involved rather than just great numbers of them. We ask: ***Do the participants, scope and outcomes of our deliberations and activities usefully embrace an adequate spectrum of the diversity of people and factors involved?***

This effort to include all the relevant people and parts is our first and most important application of the principle of “the whole” in wise democracy work. Most of the wise democracy patterns can be seen as specific approaches to including all parts of the whole.

With that basic established, let’s look at this realm a bit more closely. We can benefit by exploring a finer grain to this general inclusiveness, which may involve considerations like these:

- What diverse information, stories, experience and perspectives do these people and groups bring - or which need to be introduced in their absence?
- What are (or could be) the roles particular agents play in generating the situation and/or in its resolution?
- What skills, abilities, financial and material resources, connections and networks, etc., do they (or could they) bring to this effort?
- What aspects of their character can be viewed as factors in the situation or resources for addressing it?
- What diverse cognitive styles - ways of knowing, learning, thinking, responding, and solving things - do they bring to working on the situation?
- What needs, interests, passions, values, and other manifestations of life energy are playing out in what’s happening here? Who is manifesting which of these - and what are their deep commonalities?

These offer only a taste of the many dimensions and challenges of inclusion. But at the same time, note that some varieties of each of these factors and resources have a more holistic quality than others. For example, information derived from systems thinking has more holistic utility than isolated data points, because it embraces a larger, more dynamic picture of interrelationships. Likewise, people who are adept at making connections, facilitating productive interactions, or teasing out the big picture have particularly holistic skills to offer. Multi-modal intelligence offers full-spectrum cognitive capacity and within that, insight, intuition, vision, and compassion (“heart intelligence”) offer ways of encountering the world that can instantly embrace more of the whole (or the essence) of what’s going on and needed (which is, of course, best integrated with reason).

So considering “the whole” inclines us towards inclusion. However, since a whole is not just a cluster of parts, but parts in generative relationship and aligned as a whole, we need to be alert to our capacity for inclusion - how great that capacity is, how to increase it, and how to make it generative. In any given moment or initiative, we can only include so much and still be able to achieve wise outcomes. Moving too far beyond our capacity is a recipe for chaos and folly. But as wise democracy practitioners we are inclined to push the limits, to include more, and to do what we can to make our inclusive dynamics more productive.... and then to learn from what happens. This is another focus of the wise democracy pattern language.



2. "The Whole" as "The Whole Context": Reaching out into the bigger picture

Now we can delve even deeper and wider. Beyond questions about who and what should be included in "the whole" of what we're focusing on, we can consider questions of context: To what extent do we understand the larger settings within which the players and their situation are embedded and which shape what has happened, is happening, and could happen? Here are six of many context-clarifying questions we could ask:

- What are the dominant *systems* - social, political, economic, cultural, physical, ecological, climatic, etc. - involved here?
- What *stories* are people telling themselves and each other, which shape how they think, feel, and behave?
- What *developmental, historic, and evolutionary trajectories*, stages and dynamics apply to the situation and those involved in it?
- What modes and dynamics of *power* are at work here (for better and/or worse) or could be usefully engaged?
- What *opportunities, constraints, and resources* seem to be part of this situation, perhaps unrecognized or inadequately considered by most people involved?
- What *shared environments* – physical infrastructure and natural surroundings; processes and procedures; understandings, assumptions and agreements; purposes, visions, and goals; etc... – have shaped what's happened so far or could be set up to help the situation evolve in more positive ways?

The primary message here is that context is not a static passive background element. It plays a dynamic role in the situation. It shapes what is seen as possible and what the players tend to do about that. Creating or reframing context can transform the whole situation and have a powerful catalytic effect on what happens next. Furthermore, our appropriate responsiveness to changing contexts is fundamental to our capacity to sustain congruence (or "fit") with our environment, a vital dimension of wholeness which, evolutionary theory reminds us, is essential for our survival.

3. "The Whole" as Holistic Attitudes: There's more to it...

In addition to "the whole thing" and "the whole context", there are certain attitudes and life-stances that are typically associated with a holistic perspective that can be (or should be) part of considering "the whole" of anything.

Most significantly, ***in taking wholeness seriously, we realize that there is always more that could be understood than we understand now or can currently understand - or even more than we will ever understand. And there is always more that could be done, or be done better.***

So to the extent we take these realities to heart, we end up manifesting certain qualities like the following:

- a certain level of humility - and thus avoidance of arrogance and hubris;
- a sense of perspective and tolerance (often seasoned with humor);
- a tendency to be open, curious, inclusive, adaptive and flexible. This includes the capacity to let go, to be unattached even to our favorite perspectives, and a recognition of the power of well-designed questions and non-linear "emergent" processes to open us up into productive interactions with ourselves, each other, and the world;



- *an acceptance of (and ability to abide in) complexity, confusion, ambiguity, mystery, polarity, paradox, and other forms of irresolution and thus;*
- *an avoidance of oversimplification and jumping to conclusions;*
- *a penchant for seeing diverse phenomena as facets of some larger whole(s) which sometimes seem discernible and articulable and sometimes seem mysterious – often associated with an interest in dynamics and models that integrate many factors into more comprehensive understandings;*
- *an interest in, respect for, experience of and/or intimate engagement with one or more larger transpersonal domains ranging from Spirit and Psyche to Evolution, Nature, and/or the nonlinear dimensions of scientific understanding such as quantum physics, complexity science, ecology and other systems sciences, morphogenic field theory, etc. – often with a sense of awe, identity (we ARE that!), guidance, and/or sacredness (significantly, the word “holy” derives from “whole”).*

4. “The Whole” as Wholeness itself: Powerful qualities that make a whole a whole

Engaging with “the whole” involves perspectives and understandings that come from delving into the nature of wholeness itself.

Most mainstream definitions of wholeness are variants of “nothing missing and everything complete, unbroken, uncut, perfectly healthy, free of any defect or impairment, having all its proper parts” - which are all fine as far as they go.

Definitions like that reflect the previously noted holistic bias towards inclusiveness. That is a good starting place but tends to focus on (including) the parts. Such definitions barely hint at the dynamic nature and “more-ness” of wholeness, such as the principle that “a whole is greater than (or different from) the sum of its parts.” In other words there is more to a whole than its parts, especially the novel qualities that emerge from the interrelationships and interactions of the parts. Consider, for example, the liquidity of water at room temperature that cannot be derived from the respective natures of hydrogen and oxygen separately - or the strength of triangles that cannot be replicated in any other arrangement of three lines. **A whole is thus irreducible to its parts, which is perhaps the most fundamental principle of wholeness.**

What sort of factors make a whole MORE than its parts? This question can guide us as we seek to tap the wisdom and capacities of the whole.

The following list offers a number of significant factors we can consider on this journey:

Synergy. This dynamic is what makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts. As noted, synergy includes the idea of “emergence”, the appearance of new phenomena not readily derived from the parts alone, often generated by their arrangements, relationships or interactions.

Holergy. This is the dynamic through which an entity or phenomenon is a whole in its own right and is thus greater than its role in any larger whole of which it is a part. For example, let us consider the many gifts and connections possessed by each individual member of a group which - if recognized, supported and used - could constitute a rich resource for the group. (A related concept, holon, conceives of every entity as both a whole, itself, and as a part of one or more larger wholes.)



Thrival. Health, healing, wholeness, resilience, regenerativity, sustainability – these all refer to states of being whole, becoming whole, or regaining or sustaining wholeness in the face of challenges. It embraces factors that facilitate these capacities, usually involving some sort of harmonious or responsive relationships among parts of the whole that support their ongoing collective functionality and well-being in that dynamic arrangement.

Co-creativity. Co-creativity is not just a group dynamic. In its larger sense, the word refers to the participatory, interdependent, co-evolutionary, intersubjective nature of all life and reality. To the extent we realize and apply the idea of this intrinsic ubiquitous co-creativity, we transcend blame and powerlessness since causality is variously and broadly shared. Since we are all involved (and not just as victims), we can reclaim our agency, especially in partnership with others to co-create new understandings and realities. Acknowledging and supporting co-creativity highlights the value of good process, and of attending to history and to what is emerging among us and from us. Major among co-creative dynamics is this:

Dynamic balance. People often equate wholeness with balance. The balance that characterizes most wholes is not homeostatic, but rather a feedback-rich dance of diverse and often seemingly opposed factors. In polarities like Unity/Diversity or Order/Chaos, the two phenomena are ubiquitous, complementary, and even mutually dependent. While each can be toxic by itself, together in wholesome (whole-supporting) relationship they generate much of the “more-ness” that characterizes wholeness.

Uniqueness. Everyone, everything and every moment is its own full being with its own immense and vibrant wholeness that can be encountered, appreciated, supported, and tapped into. In recognizing this uniqueness we can participate in releasing its special gifts into the world. (Note that integrity is a special form of this, highlighting the worthiness and dependability of a person’s or thing’s uniqueness.)

Life energy. This manifests in most of the other forms of wholeness as well as through people’s needs, interests, passions, and values. Yet the more diverse life energies get released, the more disturbance usually results. However, to the extent we can engage with that disturbance creatively, life energy drives situations towards greater or newer forms of wholeness, adding to the wisdom and resourcefulness available.

Whole-in-the-Part. A whole not only contains its parts but each of the parts can contain the whole, as exemplified by holograms, fractals, microcosms, archetypes, genes, cultures, holopticism, etc., enabling fractions of a whole to comprehend, manifest and/or generate that whole. This includes the idea that there can be greater synergy between parts and wholes, such that they serve each other’s wellbeing and potential, bringing us full circle in this list back to Synergy.

Phenomena like these can teach us to get beyond wholeness as a static concept of unity or harmony and realize that diversities and disturbances within any whole evoke life energies that push towards healing, emergence and transformation. We realize that all wholes and patterns of wholeness constantly evolve and that we are part of that unfolding. To the extent we are awake to this, we will find ourselves challenged and/or inspired to be more conscious and choiceful regarding how we play our roles in that great evolutionary story.



All the above aspects of wholeness are, in a sense, freebies - freely available resources requiring minimal investment beyond depth of appreciation and insightful design and arrangement. Understanding wholeness can therefore be particularly important when the usual forms of resources (time, money, power, knowledge, etc.) seem scarce. There is therefore very practical value in exploring how these phenomena can play a role in evoking and engaging the wisdom and resourcefulness of the whole on behalf of the whole.

For further perspective on wholeness, see [my essays on the subject](#).

5. "The Whole" as "The Ultimate": Tapping the biggest, deepest realities

Beyond and including all these dimension of wholeness is their manifestation in the deepest and broadest possible phenomena. This takes us into realms that, while not being strictly necessary for the consideration and use of ideas like wise democracy, co-intelligence and evolutionary activism, nevertheless offer tremendous potential value. People and groups conversant with such realms can tap insights, capacities and inspiration that serve the mission of evoking and engaging the wisdom and resourcefulness of the whole on behalf of the whole.

The realms I'm speaking of here include the the whole of life, the whole universe, and various understandings of and experiences of ultimate reality, beingness, consciousness, interconnectedness and unity. Any of these realms can be variously viewed and approached as

- *the supreme agency through which all things happen;*
- *the ultimate reality and largest context within which all things happen;*
- *the deepest source of insight and resources for making things happen wisely;*
- *the foundations for all life-serving attitudes and perspectives related to wholeness; and*
- *the mysterious source of all phenomena listed in the "wholeness" section above.*

The fact that these often manifest in silo'd forms like various religions, spiritual traditions, esoteric philosophies, psycho-spiritual practices, individual intuitive capacities, psychedelic drug experiences, edgy scientific theories or quasi-scientific narratives, etc., does not change the fact that they have a certain level of individual and collective potency that can be acknowledged and, where appropriate, used. This can be tricky in democratic political contexts that require "separation of church and state". However, outside of those contexts or in contexts that engage all the other domains of wholeness described above (that thereby provide a co-creative balance), their full potential can be realized to assist efforts to evoke and engage the wisdom and resourcefulness of the whole on behalf of the whole.



CONCLUSION

The specifics in this essay are not intended to be a checklist or an instruction to use everything here in all circumstances. After all, that is impossible: not only is this material not comprehensive, but its subject matter (wholeness) is infinite in both scope and nuance. And so this essay is rather intended to point to the deeper essence of wise democracy, an essence which has many manifestations which can and should be applied with sensitivity and discernment in specific circumstances and with greater sophistication as our understanding of it develops. All the aspects mentioned here can be considered windows on that whole unarticulable essence, about which we can develop greater understanding as we view it through those diverse windows and relate it to what we experience in the real world.

For example, I often advocate the use of councils called “**mini-publics**” or “citizen deliberative councils” – randomly selected microcosms of a community who are exposed to a full spectrum of information and guided by powerful questions and processes in their deliberations about a public issue in search of a deeper shared understanding of what makes sense to do about it, which they share with the broader public, elected officials, and governing agencies. This approach does not explicitly tap transpersonal Ultimates nor does it include everyone in the “whole” community, nor may it particularly tap synergies among the participants or explicitly use systems thinking or complexity theory. But it is a powerful tool for wise democracy, nevertheless.

As a contrast, I am also involved in explorations of **collaborative multi-sector, multi-stakeholder, multi-scale networks as an emerging form of governance** (which include and transcend government as we know it). This approach tracks a very different perspective on “the whole” than the reflective microcosms of a community mentioned above. Here diverse players are actually doing work in every facet of a public issue or domain and, through collaboration, attempting to use their diversity to increase the effectiveness and wisdom of their impact. Again, given our inclusive participatory bias, this, too, can be embraced as a form of wise democracy, with decisions being made by those most impacted or involved.

And then there is an international movement called **We-Space** that seeks to call forth collective wisdom from deeply authentic inquiry among spiritually aware and attuned people in group settings. Clearly this is a potential source of holistic wisdom and capacity, but what is its best place in the whole vision?

These are just three examples of radically different approaches that seek - usually implicitly and in their own unique ways - to evoke and engage the wisdom and resourcefulness of the whole on behalf of the whole. None of them covers all the ground described above. But what would be possible if more of us were engaged in developing more ways to weave these and other innovations into participatory cultures capable of continually evolving towards greater wisdom?

That’s what this work is all about.

The term “prime directive” is most associated with the Star Trek TV and film series. There, the Prime Directive basically forbids interference with alien civilizations. I imagine it derives from medicine’s Hippocratic Oath - “First, do no harm.” The wise democracy prime directive is more about maximizing positive effect than minimizing negative effects - and is “prime” in the sense that it is the fundamental moral logic underlying the entire project.