

LOOKING AT ETHOS — Contemplating some ways to know and practise wisdom

This paper by Glenda Cloughley was given to the Inaugural Wisdom in Management Conference, College of Business and Economics, Australian National University, 8 – 9 July 2010

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Contemplating some ways to know and practise wisdom



Glenda Cloughley PhD

On 8 May 2010, the ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, Dr Maxine Cooper, stood before several hundred people in Canberra's Civic Square and launched the One Million Women campaign against climate change¹ with a poem. Called *The Great Moral Call of Our Time*², it begins like this:

On a fragile blue planet called Earth -
Pr'aps alone in the whole universe -
A species called human's
Been thriving and blooming
Among others sublimely diverse.

But the human species has a knack
For getting things all out of whack.
The things we invent,
For good purposes meant,
Have a habit of biting us back ...

¹ You can join the campaign at <http://www.1millionwomen.com.au/>

² The poet is Peter Copeman

Our self-given name, homo sapiens,
Even that's not a specially snappy'un
"Sapiens" – it means "wise".
Now there's a surprise,
'Cos our wisdom account's not a happy'un.

Maxine Cooper is a former Fulbright Scholar with a PhD in environmental planning. She could readily have put her hands on scientific data to demonstrate the need for action on the planetary crisis of climate change. Instead, she chose a colloquial poem whose 28 verses lack a single statistic. When I asked "Why poetry?" she said, "Some people respond best to poetry — and others respond to music, drama and speech. Poetry is a means of communicating — a way of getting the message over to engage people."

Dr Cooper's pointer to there being many ways of knowing and engaging people is worth considering in this conference as we focus on the imperative that climate change and other global crises give us for finding ways to grow a lot more credit in the wisdom account of homo sapiens.

How do we do this? It's probably a telling sign about the perplexity of the question — as well as the foresight of the College of Business and Economics — that this is the inaugural Wisdom in Management conference at the National University. As far as I know, wisdom is not on the teaching curriculum or research agenda of any ANU College, though the ethical challenges of climate change mean that this conference is an important precedent.

It is good to be in this place, which employs hundreds of doctors of philosophy who — etymologically speaking — have already graduated into the lineages of those who love wisdom.



philosopher, a lover of wisdom; an expert or student of philosophy ...

philosophy, love, study or pursuit of wisdom and knowledge; the knowledge of the causes and laws of existence and all things; the principles underlying any department of knowledge; reasoning; alchemy; mental or emotional equilibrium ...

[from Greek *Philosophos* - *philein*, to love, *sophia*, wisdom]

Maybe there is a hint in these definitions about love as a necessary ingredient in the alchemy of wisdom. All such clues are useful because, as the poem implies, it is easier to say directly what wisdom is not, than what it is.

As we contemplate ways to know and practise wisdom — which means *becoming* wise, *being* wise — I hope to persuade you that while this must include rationality, it cannot depend upon it to the extent that's usual in academic curricula and conferences.

A later verse in the Commissioner's poem suggests that we will have to admit other ways of knowing to encompass the reality that wise and unwise humans alike are an emotional and spiritual, and not entirely logical species:

What we need is a new paradigm
To reverse man-made change to our clime.
We ALL hold the fate
In our hands – small or great –
Of this great moral call of our time.

Morality — an ethical sensibility — is an element of this new paradigm, alongside wisdom. And we learn more about these kinds of qualities by listening to stories about their epiphanies than from studying their definitions. The dictionaries I looked into for wisdom just pointed to some equally ineffable other qualities like good judgement, discretion, learnedness and the capacity to put knowledge to good use. My *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (Revised Edition) even mentions piety and godliness.

You have probably noticed that the wisdom traditions tend to be passed on through the arts — in *examples* of wisdom in myth, teaching stories, poetry, music, dance, sculpture and other art forms. Wise souls have drawn attention to this in diverse ways, as we see in these statements from an eighteenth century Irish-Anglo political philosopher and statesman, and a contemporary Laguna Pueblo novelist from Albuquerque, New Mexico:

Example is the school of mankind, and they will learn at no other.

EDMUND BURKE, (1729 – 1797)

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said].
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories ...

LESLIE MARMON SILKO, from *Ceremony* (1977)

In ancient Greece, where European traditions of philosophy and democracy began, mythos was not vanquished by the rational principle of logos.

Aristotle, whose writings contain the earliest known formal study of logic, also wrote acutely intelligent, wise texts on poetics, metaphysics and ethics.

He was one of the great rational philosophers, a logos adept and master of reason, aetiology (the study of causes) and disputational knowing. Aristotle knew about hard-ball politics and power and the will, which also belong to logos. Yet he had equal regard for mythic theatre and the relational principle of eros.

Mythos / Eros



Logos



Eros encompasses a lot of human experience that cannot be omitted when we're looking for wisdom. Think of love; relatedness; association; longing and belonging; care; friendship; attachment; intimacy; empathy; harmony; accord; association; comparison; complement; appreciation and the likenesses between things.

C G Jung described Logos and Eros as "the basic equation". In all truly wise people they stand equal and opposite.

Eros ————— Logos

relational principle

rational principle



In management, if you've had the good fortune to be mentored by someone who lives up to the origin of their role — in the wise leadership of that mythic Mentor who guided Odysseus home after a long, long journey — you may have noticed how the best effect comes when you're told stories that give examples of how similar predicaments to yours were solved in other situations. Stories like these bring relatedness and rationality together in wisdom.

Meeting Ethos

To see an example — indeed, an exemplary case — of personified wisdom, we move some 20 metres west of the One Million Women campaign launch to the single figure of a woman who has stood there quietly, with constancy and grace, since 1961.



As the city changes around her, this figure continues to embody something of Walter Burley Griffin's hope that Civic Square would become the "living heart" of Canberra.



Her name is Ethos. She is located outside the front entrance of the ACT Legislative Assembly. A plaque gives the name of the sculptor of Ethos as Tom Bass and her meaning as "spirit of the community".

Ethos was commissioned in 1959 and completed in 1961. She was Canberra's first public art work.

When the 93-year-old sculptor died in February this year, ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope described Ethos as “arguably Canberra's most important artwork.”

If you look up ‘ethos’ in the Macquarie Dictionary you will find that the sociological meaning of the word is “the fundamental spiritual characteristics of a culture”. Ethos comes into English from the Greek language, and our word ‘ethics’ also comes from ‘ethos’.

So let’s look at her more closely.

Ethos is 5.5 metres tall. She is humanly proportioned with a facial expression that is serious yet understanding and soft. In 1961, Bass said he wanted “the *love* which Canberra people have for their city to be identified with her.” (There’s that word again.)

In the story *The Daily Telegraph* published in December 1961, a week before Ethos was unveiled, Bass said: “I want [Canberra people] to be conscious of her first as an image from a distance. ... Then comes the moment when they become personally involved with her... they feel her looking at them, reflecting their love for the place”.³



“I want [Canberra people] to be conscious of her first as an image from a distance ...

³ *The Daily Telegraph* 7 December 1961, cited in ACT Heritage Register

... an image from a distance ...



... Then comes the moment when they become personally involved with her... they feel her looking at them, reflecting their love for the place."

- Tom Bass, *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 December 1961

An NCDC file note from 1960 also records his concern about beauty, saying that the sculpture would be "beauty arising from and through a plan — in this case, beauty represented by the National Capital arising from and through a planned city".⁴

The substantial ACT Heritage Register citation for Ethos notes that "the form of the work is highly symbolic".



"Beauty arising from and through a plan ..."

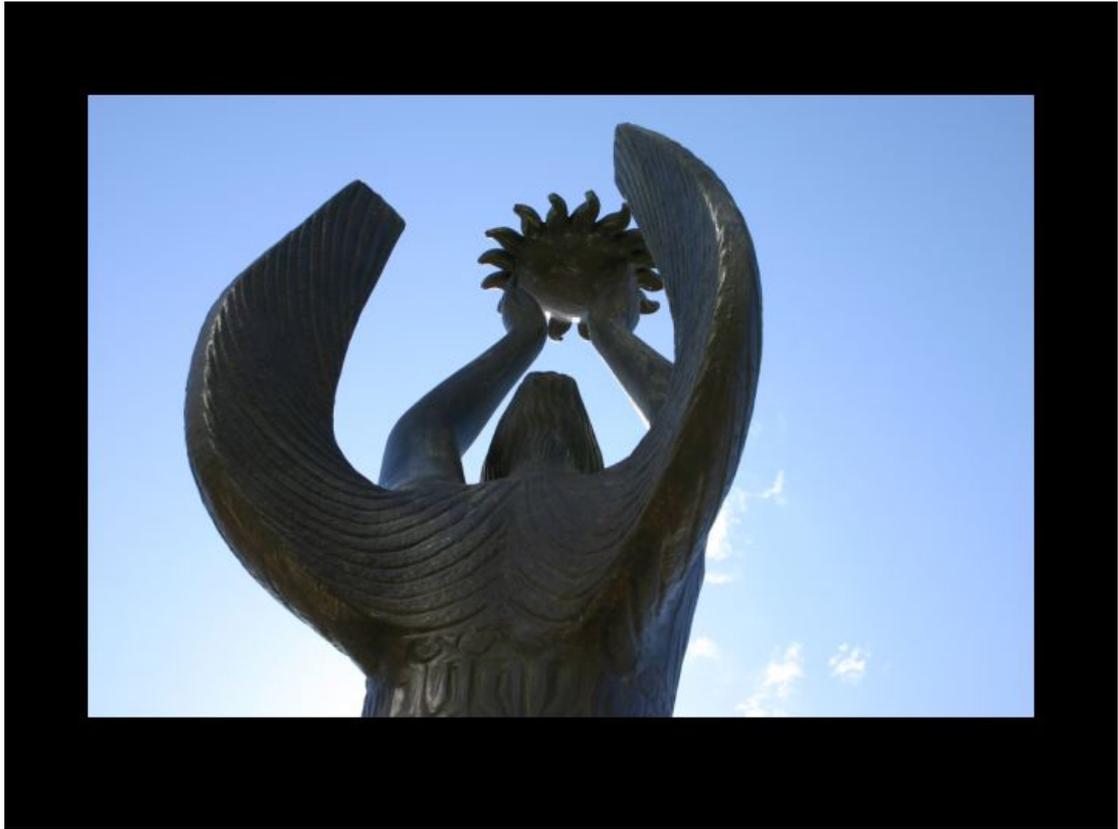
We learn that:

" The shallow saucer on which the figure stands represents Canberra's nickname "Frosty Hollow".

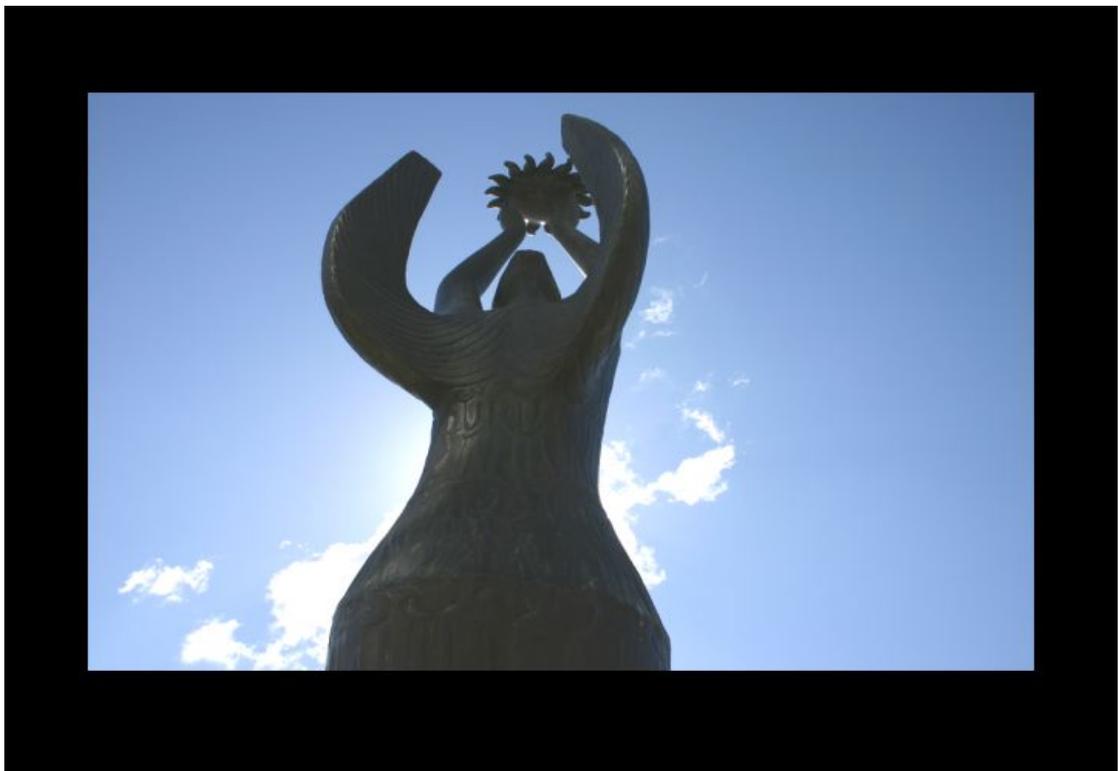
... The surface of the saucer bears a relief map of Canberra. ... [with] indentations ... [to] represent the lake that was later to fill the space between the Civic Centre and the administrative part of the city."

In many ways, the work is a sculptural analogue and personification of Walter Burley Griffin's plan for the ideal city.

⁴ NCDC file note, 4 May 1960



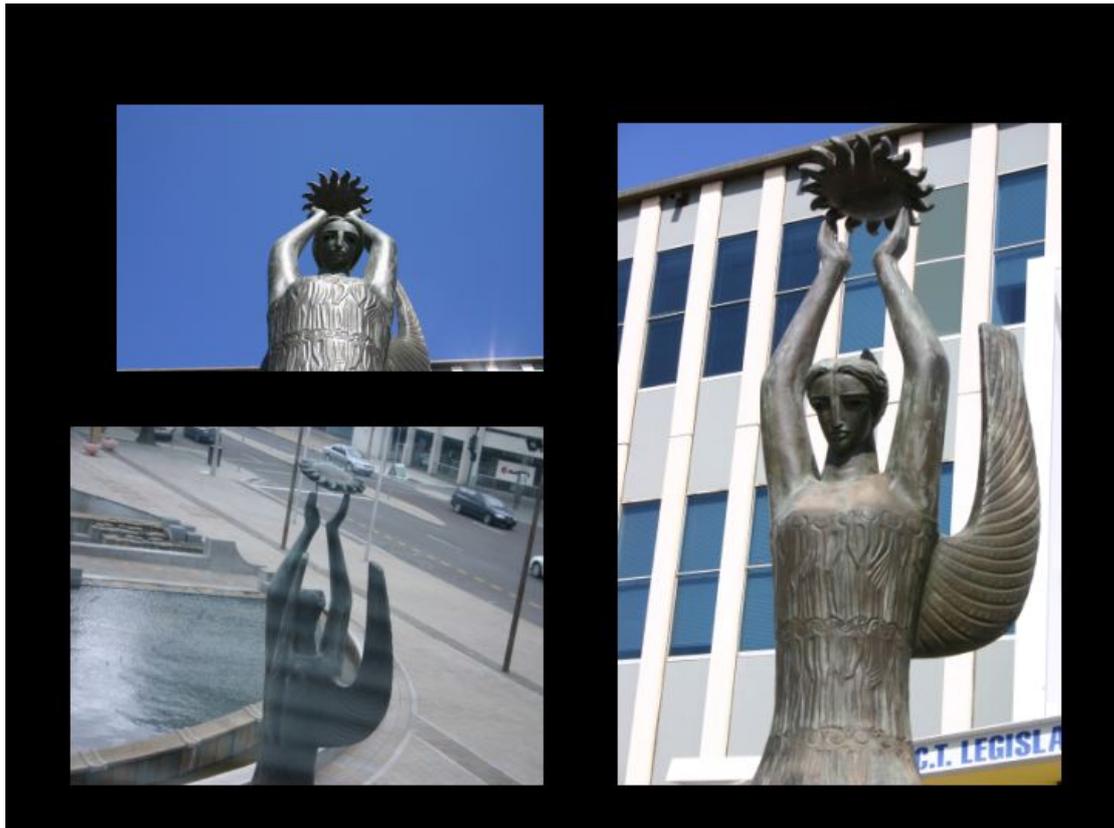
The posture and raised wings suggest a civilising, spiritual character and the wide hips are generative.





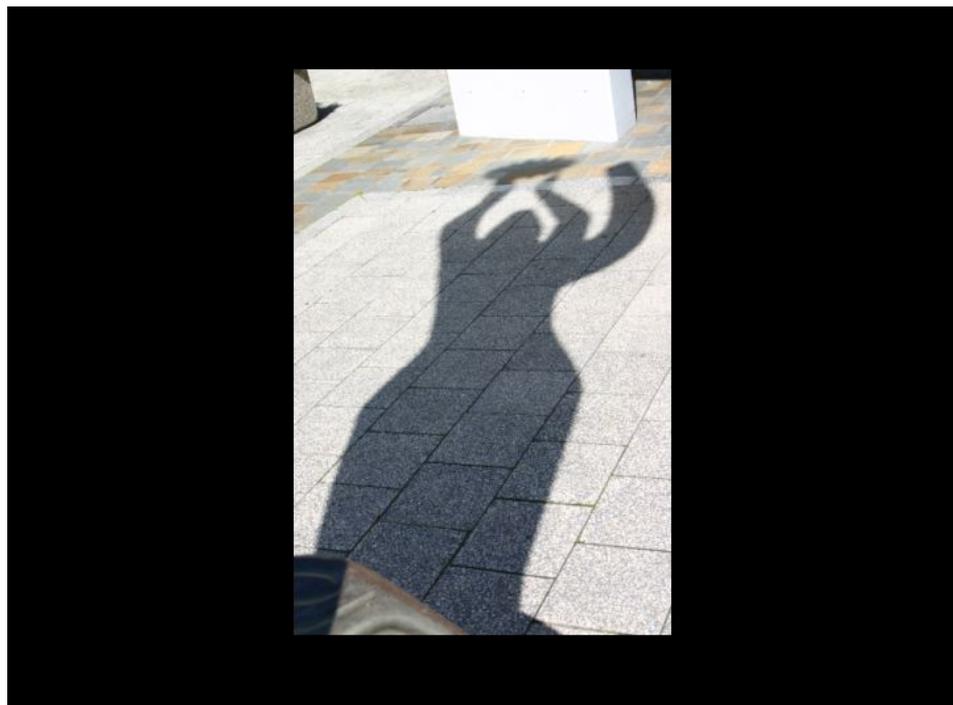
The figure is robed in a fabric richly embossed with symbols of ancient civilisations and images of the citizens who make their home in the Australian Capital Territory, the nation's only city-state.





In reaching to the sun, Ethos points to the rational as well as relational basis of governance. The Heritage Citation says, "The bursting sun she holds aloft is symbolic of culture and enlightenment which the presence of Canberra's University, its research organisations and the Diplomatic Corps and so on give to the city."

Even her dancing shadow is beautiful.



I was close to Tom Bass in the last decade of his life, and five years ago, when he was 89 years old, I was involved with Canberra's A Chorus of Women in planning for a Festival of Peace that was to be held in the ACT Legislative Assembly to celebrate the 95th anniversary of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. We wanted to do something around Ethos in the festival, so I phoned Tom to ask whether he thought Ethos might have something to say to the Canberra community after all the years of standing there quietly.

"Mmm, we'll see," he said in his warm voice.

A few days later he rang me in a great state of excitement. He had woken at 4.30am with Ethos talking to him, so he had got out of bed and written down what she said.

When you visit Ethos, you can read what she told Tom because he engraved it in a plaque that has been set into the pavers beside the sculpture.

Fourteen months ago, Tom made another statement about his sculpture:

"As the creator of the sculpture, Ethos, it was my hope that she would inspire the people with the value and importance of community. I expressed this through her brocaded garment, the earth she stands on and the sun that enlightens it," he said.

At the time Tom wrote this, A Chorus of Women was planning to stage performances of my mythic story-song about present relations between people and Earth, *The Gifts of the Furies*, in which Ethos takes the role played in ancient Athens by Athena, the divinity of Civilised Wisdom.

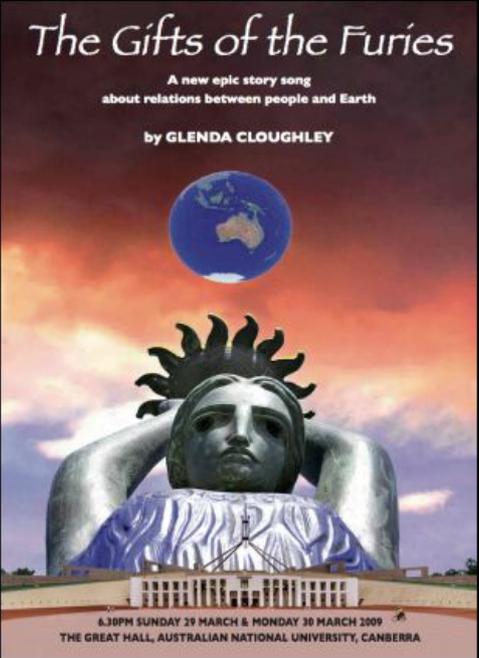
I checked with Tom throughout the process of bringing Ethos to life. You can hear quite a lot in other parts of his statement of support about his original vision of what Ethos would become in the Canberra community⁵. He said of *The Gifts of the Furies*:

"Ethos takes full possession of her role as the Spirit of the community. She expresses the yearnings of the time, in which peace and reconciliation are central. She also enacts her role as the intermediary between the forces of earth and heaven. With climate change being the crisis of our times Ethos's actions are those of a loving and wise guide."

- from Tom Bass's supporting statement for 2010 performances of *The Gifts of the Furies*

The Gifts of the Furies will be presented by A Chorus of Women in partnership with The Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House with funding support from artsACT

**7pm Saturdays, 11, 18 and 25 September 2010
FREE ADMISSION**



The Gifts of the Furies
A new epic story song
about relations between people and Earth
by GLENDA CLOUGHLEY

6.30PM SUNDAY 29 MARCH & MONDAY 30 MARCH 2009
THE GREAT HALL, AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, CANBERRA

⁵ For more information about the 2010 performances, with about 70 Canberra men and women in the Chorus of Citizens, see <http://www.chorusofwomen.org/whatsnew.htm> - Gifts Contacts: Musical Director Johanna McBride 0402 252 885, Meg Rigby (02) 6249 1948 or me (02) 6239 6483

A depth psychology perspective on wisdom

Now, we will stay close to Ethos at the same time as we change perspective — moving to depth psychology for a look at the psychodynamics of wisdom and the kinds of environment in which it is likely to manifest.

Wisdom is an emergent quality. It belongs to a category of desirable human propensities and activities that can no more be ordered into existence than Tom could have predicted that Ethos would speak in his dream.

Here are some other emergent qualities:

LOOKING AT ETHOS

Emergent Qualities

- Wisdom
- Empathy and compassion
- Belonging
- Peaceful living
- Goodness
- Hope
- Creative play and work
- Ethical sensibility
- Meaning
- Meaningful symbols
- Psychological & cultural maturity



Notable among these is the kind of ethical sensibility that comes from consciously holding the tension between relational and rational factors. This is the sort of ethos we will need in addressing climate change. It is much more than moral codes that are based on sanctions against bad behaviour.

That all these qualities are layered into the figure of Ethos tells a lot about why Tom Bass consistently described this as his most significant totemic sculpture.

The way they emerge can be traced in a deep-structure natural process that is hard-wired into us, but usually lies buried beneath surface events.

I will tell you about the energy and skeletal form of this process as I learned it from C G Jung and other wise people, and as I have seen it unfold itself many, many times as I have worked with individuals and in cultural contexts. Then I'll flesh it out in the story of the making of Ethos as Tom Bass told it to me.

First, we go back to Aristotle and his book *Politics*. This contains some intelligent psychological observations that we can use to think about the question Tom faced in 1959 when he received his commission and set out to represent the spirit of the future Canberra community.

In the opening paragraphs of his book, Aristotle famously says that “man is by nature a political animal”. That sounds right for this place, though a creature of *polis*, the city, is what he really means.

He goes on then to trace our sociable human nature through the history of some forms of association. He says these began with family and household groups. Then villages emerged and, finally, the city-state. The city-state is the ultimate form of association because it is self-sufficient, he says. ‘Sustainable’, we would say today.

This might be especially interesting for those of us who live in Australia’s only city-state. But the main thing is a general principle Aristotle draws from his evolutionary chain of social association. This is that *we know a thing by what it has in it to become*.

This axiom leads on into a discussion of causes through which he explains why things, including cities, occur.

TELOS:

purpose, goal, the completion or ‘perfection’ of full development

A core idea in Aristotle’s *Politics*:

we know a thing by what it has in it to become



The most important for the emergence of the *polis* is not a process of cause and effect or stimulus and response that we could find with our rationality, but telos, the final cause. Telos is the condition of completion or wholeness characteristic of maturity. It is the end; the goal — the purpose of development. Aristotle thinks of this both in the case of the physical telos through which a foal becomes a horse, or a girl a woman, and also in the kind of psychological and cultural maturity that Tom Bass represented in the figure of Ethos.

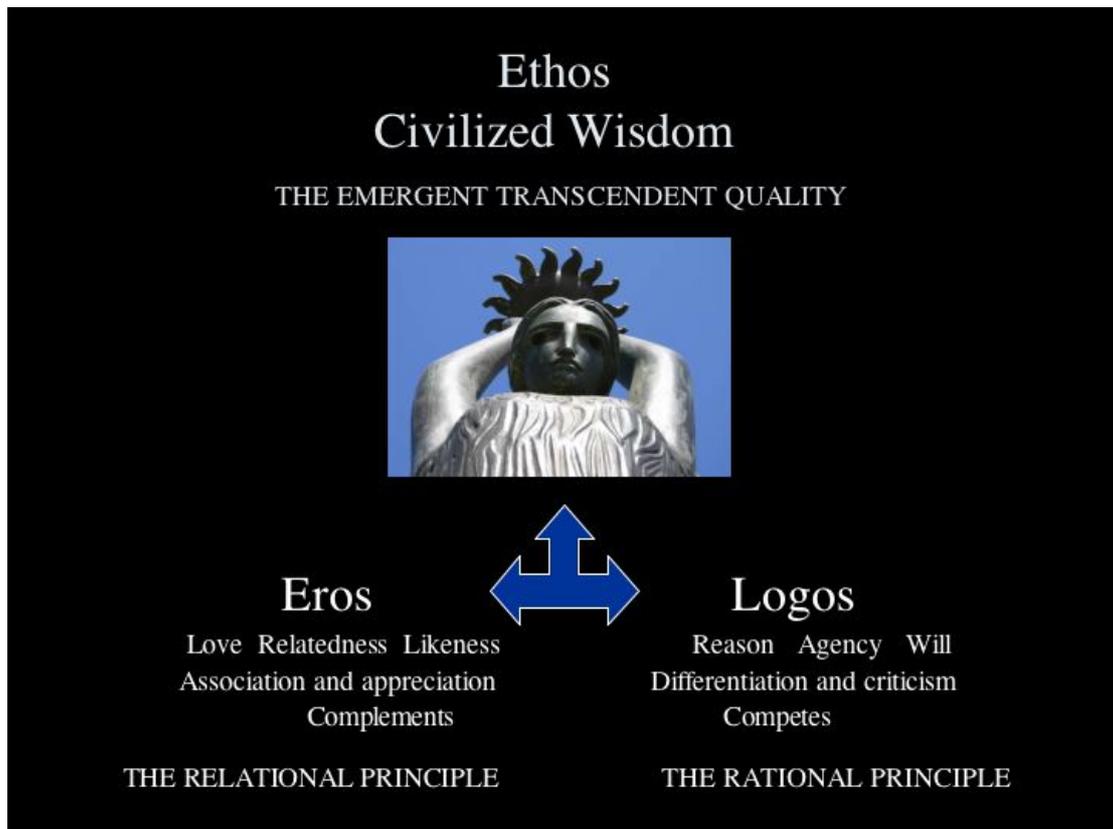
There is nothing magical or unscientific about this.

The telos is what the physicist David Bohm called the ‘implicate order’ in the cosmos and ourselves and all other things that unfurls itself when the environment permits. It is the bright flower in a little brown bulb; the butterfly in a fat cocoon; the goal or purpose that draws people towards the fulfilment of their potential, and it is synonymous with the good.

Telos can be regarded as the destiny of an individual or community spirit — in effect, its destination, which needs only a facilitating environment to emerge. The destiny of telos is opposite to fate that is inherited from the past; from history, which – if it is traumatic – may stifle potential and arrest the movement of telic energies towards maturity.

So now we have the energy of telos, which draws us towards fulfillment of potentials, including wisdom, as though it comes from the future. And we have the energy of cause and effect, or experience and history. There's a tension between these.

And there's a further tension, often more difficult to hold, between the relational and rational principles we met earlier. When the tension is held, those transcendent qualities emerge.



Here, we see Ethos as Civilized Wisdom, the quality that Athena brought to Athens in its golden age.

In cultural settings, the emergence – the transcendence of the opposites – is not easy to bring about because organizations, especially big ones, are more likely to be political than relational systems. And when the horizontal axis that holds eros and logos in balance tips to the vertical, no transcendent qualities emerge.

Of course, we need the will, agency, the capacity to differentiate, to criticize, to compete, power to make things happen, but not in hegemonic doses.

HEGEMONIC LOGOS

tyrannical rationalism



EROS

oppressed
suppressed
repressed
depressed

NO POSSIBILITY OF EMERGENT WISDOM

When rationalism is tyrannical, the relational system of an organization, or an individual, becomes dysfunctional.

Yet a healthy wise ethos emerges quite naturally when the forces of relationship and power are balanced and people have the freedom and other sustaining conditions of living to make their own moral choices.

Making Ethos

By the time I met Tom Bass, he knew all that, even though it's not quite how he would put it. But 1959 and 1960 were hard years for him.

He had the commission, but what would he make?

While he was always more intent on public inspiration than material aspiration, the brief from the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) urged him to focus on the "restless, virile, energetic movement of free enterprise" and "emphasise Civic as the non-political centre" of Canberra. Prime Minister Menzies, who was driving the development of the city, took a personal interest in the sculptural commission. But Tom's imagination refused to follow NCDC into the wild hyperbole of the "restless and virile" private sector of Canberra in 1959.

The total population of the dusty bush capital at that time was 50,000. There was no Lake Burley Griffin. No development of Belconnen and Woden Valley. Sheep from a local farm often wandered into the grounds of Parliament House. You could catch yabbies in the Molonglo River under the old Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, and the Blue Moon Milk Bar in Civic was the only café in town.

So how did Ethos make herself visible? Much later, Tom thought that perhaps she began when he was a young man, attending soirées at the Castlecrag home of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney Griffin in the 1930s. He certainly caught the

hope Walter had expressed in 1912 — that Canberra would become “a city that is not like any other in the world ... a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future”.

Tom wanted to create “an emblem that would express the real possibilities” of Canberra. But what were these? And what image would represent them symbolically?

Every work day for a whole year Tom went to the desk in his studio and waited for the right idea to come. As months rolled on he was in a kind of agony. He thought the sculpture would be abstract, but his pen couldn't draw anything that brought the feeling of community spirit and the rational ideas in the city plan together. He produced “a vast pile of useless drawings”, and when the Prime Minister got someone to ring up to ask where the sculpture was he had nothing to report. The anguish was nearly unbearable.

Finally – desperately – he asked a friend who happened to be a Franciscan abbot whether the monks in Campbelltown would pray for the right image to show itself. They did, and the very next morning Tom traced the first line of a woman's body.

He was freed then into making the large anodised copper figure.

But he fretted again when the design was complete, this time about the work's name. He thought *The Spirit of Canberra* sounded too much like a train, but nothing else occurred until “ethos”, an unfamiliar word, fell into his mind one day.

The way these wise things of artistic intuition and imagination occur is always a mystery. They're hard for academics because rationality can't account for them. Yet they have much to contribute to business, economics, politics, science and other social elements that must get together to work out collaborative ways of understanding and addressing the pressing troubles of our time. Jung said that artists were “constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking”⁶.

The fact is that practices of the new ethical paradigm emerge in those people who have already achieved the synthesis of eros and logos, love and logic, relationship and rationality in themselves.

It took Tom so long to see the beautiful face, body and meaning of Ethos because her precise apprehension required *his* passage through that disciplined period of ethical and spiritual preparation in which he showed up at his desk for a whole year and went home not kidding himself; knowing the spirit hadn't appeared; that he wasn't ready yet; then recognising her face and her voice when they did come.

Late last year, he said to me that he was very glad she would still be there when he was gone.

So we will finish with the words that Ethos, the spirit of the community, spoke into his dream of 2005 for the people of Canberra. And just before that, I will tell you about a sweet secret that opened as I contemplated her voice, wondering whether it also spoke a message about the practice and knowing of wisdom.

When you visit Ethos, you will see that 90-year-old Tom Bass did not give his name as author of the poem he engraved into the modest plaque beside the sculpture. He was asked about this in 2007 during a meeting I attended with the Chief Minister before the plaque was cast in bronze, and he responded quietly and firmly: “I did not write it. Ethos is the author.” The delicate, respectful silence that followed this statement is now cemented into the pavers of Civic Square. And an irrefutable, emergent truth is also enshrined there.

This is that although dear, wise Tom Bass has passed, Ethos is still there in the living heart of our city, and she could speak to you too.

⁶ *The Spirit of Man in Art and Literature, Collected Works* Volume 15, paragraph 130

ETHOS SPEAKS

I AM ETHOS

THOUGH I DO NOT
SPEAK WITH WORDS
I SPEAK TO YOU
IN OTHER WAYS

I SAY TO YOU THAT
I AM THE SPIRIT
OF THIS PLACE
AND ITS PEOPLE

I AM
THE ORIGINAL SPIRIT
AND THE SPIRIT OF NOW

I RISE FROM THE EARTH
AND REACH FOR THE SUN

I BRING TOGETHER
THE OLD AND NEW

IN ME THERE IS
NO VIOLENCE OR WAR
ONLY PEACE
AND RECONCILIATION

I AM THE LOVE
PEACE AND BEAUTY
OF THIS PLACE

I GIVE YOU
THESE THINGS
EVERY DAY
AND ALWAYS



A Chorus of Women and 200 singers from Canberra choirs gather around *Ethos* in Civic Square. International Day of Peace, 21 September 2007

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Dr Glenda Cloughley is a Jungian analyst, cultural psychologist and singer-composer as well as a Visiting Fellow in the College of Physical Sciences at the ANU. She has set the poem 'Ethos Speaks' to music that has been performed several times by A Chorus of Women, including at a special event to honour Tom Bass during 40th birthday celebrations of the National Library of Australia in 2008, and as part of *The Gifts of the Furies*. Glenda has created several other mythic performance pieces on pressing social issues. She occasionally presents conference papers in Australia and overseas on cultural themes, sometimes with associated music. Glenda was born in Invercargill, New Zealand, and has lived most of her adult life in Canberra. She has also worked as a newspaper journalist, and public affairs and management consultant.

The Gifts of the Furies will next be performed in Kings Hall and the House of Representatives Chamber in the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House during Canberra's 2010 Floriade Festival at 7pm on 11, 18 and 25 September. As Storyteller, Glenda will be joined by about 80 Canberra men and women playing The Chorus of Citizens, The Chorus of the Many (an ancestral chorus of wise souls), divinities of nature and cities, and numerous instruments. This Western law story about relations between people and Earth began as a choral song cycle, *Songs to the Earth*, and is a retelling of the Greek myth of the Eumenides, The Kindly Ones, for the present social and ethical crisis of climate change. Glenda has drawn inspiration for this work from Tom Bass and his Ethos sculpture, other wise friends, writings of contemporary earth system scientists, and the Aeschylus dramas of *The Oresteia* and Homeric Hymns of ancient Greece. The 2010 performances have free admission and will be presented by A Chorus of Women in partnership with The Museum of Australian Democracy with funding from artsACT. Musical direction is by Johanna McBride.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The late Dr Tom Bass for the great gift of *Ethos* in our city of Canberra
and the deep pleasures and treasures of mentoring friendship

Dr Christine Hansen for the beautiful photographs of *Ethos*

Thanks to Dr Maxine Cooper, ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment,
and Dr Peter Copeman for permission to quote from 'The Great Moral Call of our Time'



A CHORUS OF WOMEN has placed flowers at the feet of *Ethos* on several ceremonial occasions, including the 2005 Peace Festival at the ACT Legislative Assembly to celebrate the 95th anniversary of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

'Ethos Speaks' – first spoken on that occasion – is now engraved in a plaque set into the pavers alongside the sculpture.

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