

A Conversation with Nishida: The Obvious

“This study of yours, it is like studying the air. A fool’s quest if you ask me.”

I didn’t ask him, but that never, ever prevents Nishida-san from stating his mind, nor offering a challenge. And this provocative statement of his is clearly a challenge. It is not a direct challenge to the topic of the thesis project, or to embarking on the thesis research itself. My inner Zen master is challenging my state of mind, to ensure that I inhabit the particular state of mind that will enable me to see what I need to see. Ahh...

“You are correct, *sensei*. It is like studying the air. I must endeavour to see that which others cannot see. The air is invisible to everyone, save for its effects. The zephyr-like breeze ruffles the bulrushes, and the gale moves large branches and may uproot great trees. The freshness of dew-laden dawn awakens us, and the weight of summer’s humid burden oppresses. The air can be clear or blanketed with fog. There are many ways to study the air even though we cannot see it directly.

He sighs the heavy sigh of a teacher who has all but given up hope for the student that is as dense as the fog I invoke. “If

you wish to study wind or humidity or fog, I suggest you speak to a physicist, and I am no physicist. But if you want to study the *air* and you are coming to me for guidance...” His voice trails off.

“But I am not studying the air. I am studying *organization*,” I protest.

“Precisely. Organization. Air. There is no difference. Each is invisible. Obvious until it is no longer present in someone’s life. Creator of many effects that are well studied by those who think themselves to be physicists but are not. You seek to study that which is obvious to everyone and therefore your study is of no value to those who will not value the obvious. It is a fool’s quest.”

He smiles the wry smile of a teacher who has just set the answer before his student, sitting in silence to see if it will be taken up. He waits, watching as I turn his words over and over in my mind.

“But...” I begin, tentatively. “But if I can show people the value in the obvious, that which they experience every day and take for granted, it is no longer obvious. They begin to think differently, not just about what is obvious, *organization*. They begin to *think* differently... about everything.”

“Ah,” he exhales with a satisfied smile, “now not so foolish. You have an unusual mind. And, you will need it.”

I give him a quizzical look.

“From a timeless colleague, Alfred North Whitehead. ‘It requires a very unusual mind to undertake the analysis of the obvious¹.’ You are well on the way. This is, after all, an unusual conversation with which to begin.”

¹ Whitehead (1929/1978) p. 5