Engendering a New Generation of Public Intellectuals

Speaking Truth to Power with Grace and Humility

KARIM-ALY KASSAM

“I die, I die!” the Mother said,
“My Children die for lack of Bread.
What more has the merciless Tyrant said?”
The Monk sat down on the Stony Bed.

The blood red ran from the Grey Monk’s side,
His hands & feet were wounded wide,
His Body bent his arms & knees
Like to the roots of ancient trees.

His eye was dry; no tear could flow:
A hollow groan first spoke his woe.
He trembled & shudder’d upon the Bed;
At length with a feeble cry he said:

“When God commanded this hand to write
In the studious hours of deep midnight,
He told me the writing I wrote should prove
The Bane of all that on Earth I lov’d.”
“My Brother starv’d between two Walls,
His Children’s Cry my Soul appalls:
I mock’d at the wrack & gridding chain,
My bent body mocks their torturing pain.

“My Brother starv’d between two Walls,
His Children’s Cry my Soul appalls:
I mock’d at the wrack & gridding chain,
My bent body mocks their torturing pain.

“Thy Father drew his sword in the North,
With his thousands strong he marched forth,
Thy Brother has armd himself in Steel,
To avenge the wrongs thy Children feel.

“Thy Father drew his sword in the North,
With his thousands strong he marched forth,
Thy Brother has armd himself in Steel,
To avenge the wrongs thy Children feel.

“But vain the Sword & vain the Bow,
They never can work War’s overthrow.
The Hermit’s Prayer & the Widow’s tear
Alone can free the World from fear.

“But vain the Sword & vain the Bow,
They never can work War’s overthrow.
The Hermit’s Prayer & the Widow’s tear
Alone can free the World from fear.

“For a Tear is an Intellectual Thing,
And a Sigh is the Sword of an Angel King,
And the bitter groan of the Martyr’s woe
Is an Arrow from the Almighty’s Bow.

“For a Tear is an Intellectual Thing,
And a Sigh is the Sword of an Angel King,
And the bitter groan of the Martyr’s woe
Is an Arrow from the Almighty’s Bow.

“The hand of Vengeance found the Bed
To which the Purple Tyrant fled;
The iron hand crushd the Tyrant’s head,
And became a Tyrant in his stead.”

William Blake, “The Grey Monk”

What are the guiding principles that engender a new generation of public intellectuals among our undergraduate and graduate students? This is the question reflected upon herein. While public intellectuals emerge from a variety of professional backgrounds, including literature and the arts, the objective of this work is to reflect on the formation of public intellectuals in the realm of academic scholarship.

Historically, the word *intellectual* has been associated with social tensions arising from its range of meaning. This, in turn, has contributed to the term’s significance and complex uses. *Intellectual* has been applied to people who use theory or organized knowledge to pronounce judgment on matters
of public importance, as well as with a class of elites who engage in monopolies of knowledge that allow them to claim special understanding, and therefore privilege, because they are able to promote their own indispensability (Innis 1995). The word intellectual has also been used in an effort to transcend the dichotomy between the head and the heart, or between reason and emotion, in social and political discourse. An intellectual, in this sense, employs not only the faculty of reason but also the human capacities of empathy and imagination. Since the latter part of the eighteenth century, these individuals have been understood to act independently of established political, economic, or ecclesiastical institutions of power (Williams 1989). It is this particular use of the word intellectual, together with the subsequent action it inspires in young scholars, that is the subject of this essay.

William Blake’s art and poetry are among the most effective examples of such independence from, and critical commentary on, institutions of power. In “The Grey Monk,” written in the early nineteenth century, he eloquently challenges the hegemony of reason as the intellect’s sole criterion of judgment, speaking of reason’s limiting capacity when describing the Grey Monk, whose “eye was dry” when the mother cried, “My Children die for lack of Bread.” Blake illustrates the barrenness of the intellect if it encompasses only the faculty of reason and compellingly contends that “a Tear is an Intellectual Thing.” Embracing the heart as part of the intellect frees not only the Grey Monk but the entire world from “fear.” Although Blake’s critical engagement lay with the deleterious effects of the Industrial Revolution and the hypocrisy of institutions such as the church and the English monarchy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, his words have resonance for us today.

From the beginning of my academic career, I have been committed to public scholarship, but the events of 11 September 2001 were to permanently alter my scholarly life and simultaneously confirm my role in public discourse. As a Canadian of Muslim heritage, I felt compelled to understand the acts of terror in the context of the growing xenophobia and misunderstanding that threatened the foundations of pluralistic society, which is precisely what both the terrorists and their objective allies sought to achieve. Urged by colleagues and friends, I responded immediately, writing an essay in the local newspaper as well as speaking and engaging in public discussions in church halls, corporate boardrooms, government offices, and school classrooms. I gained insight into the perspectives of Canadians from...
a wide variety of religious traditions as well as those who were atheists. These activities have resulted in two volumes of collective efforts to understand the short- and long-term implications of 11 September 2001 (Kassam, Melnyk, and Perras 2002; Kassam 2010b).

One of my most sobering realizations occurred moments before a television interview on an early morning talk show, hosted by a well-known comedian and news anchor, in the year following the events of 11 September 2001. In literature and the performing arts, the arc of tragedy is reflected in the arc of critical humour, which conveys truth by jest. The host commented that the political responses to these shocking events were providing ample material for such critical humour but expressed the fear of being censured by media bosses. Political decisions with massive implications for economic and human rights were thus evading critical scrutiny. It was at this moment that I fully understood the potentially transformative role that a tenured academic can play in democratic society, especially under conditions of stress—a role largely unavailable to individuals who must answer to their employer in the private or public sector. I would argue that this independence, this ability to contribute to public scholarship, is the raison d’être of tenure. Tenure is like a passport that affords protection by establishing one’s citizenship in a community of inquirers. Similarly, rigorous and sustained scholarship provides the visa that enables ease of movement across boundaries. Together, they provide the freedom to enter and engage with a wide variety of sociocultural and political constituencies. This is how the public intellectual “speaks truth to power with grace and humility.”

Armed with passport and visa, I have travelled to the circumpolar Arctic and to the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and my experiences there do not lead me to view terrorism as our major concern for the third millennium. Terrorism is only a symptom of something more fundamental—a reaction to the sociocultural and ecological changes that threaten the very foundations of the diversity of life on this planet and destabilize the plurality of cultures and intellectual traditions that this diversity of life supports. In the twenty-first century, humanity faces three simultaneous challenges: a global environmental, energy, and economic crisis. Humanity has no pre-established mathematical models that can provide us with formulaic or technocratic policy responses sufficient to untangle the riddle of our future.

This triumvirate of challenges and their implications for the life of the planet are indeed unprecedented in human history (Kassam and Avery
Scientists have proposed that humanity has entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene (the “age of humans”), characterized by humanity’s mass impact on a planetary scale (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The term recognizes the capacity of human habitation to alter not only the ecological balance of the biosphere but the very physical nature of the planet. Rather than celebrating human achievement, however, the term is an admission of human culpability with regard to the mass extinction of life forms and alterations to climate. Beginning with industrial development in the eighteenth century, humanity has been altering its habitat at planetary scale that was hitherto not possible. It is not that anthropogenic influence on the planet is a new phenomenon (Cronon 1983; Mann 2005; Sayre 2012; Smith 1980). Human beings from their earliest beginnings interacted with and therefore influenced their habitat. What distinguishes the Anthropocene is the simultaneous compression of the dimensions of space and time on a global scale such that the magnitude and speed of human impact is staggering. Thus, we do not have enough time to critically consider the potential impact and ethical implications of our actions.

This new epoch is also characterized by myopia regarding the scope of human impact or what appears like willful blindness to the death of birth, in which extinction outstrips the pace at which new life forms evolve. The situation is worsened by the absence of a global consensus on an ethical code to guide humanity in its behaviour. The proposed new epoch is an acknowledgement that the planet is currently operating in a *no-analogue state* (Crutzen and Steffen 2003, 253). In other words, the conditions that now exist have no equivalent, no point of comparison, with the result that our past experiences may no longer be sufficient to allow us to form a response to what confronts us. Furthermore, the concept of the Anthropocene involves the recognition that the Earth’s system includes human societies and that these humans are an integral component of the planet. Therefore, humanity can no longer sustain the illusion perpetuated by industrial society that two separate systems exist—one natural or geo-ecological and the other a human sociocultural and economic construct (Steffen et al. 2007; Kassam 2009a; Sayre 2012).

In much the same way, we can no longer cling to the idea that academic life and public life are two separate activities. University professors cannot regard public scholarship as an occasional activity; rather, it must be integrated into pedagogy and applied research, in order to illustrate to
undergraduate and graduate students alike that public engagement is the cornerstone of intellectual life in a democratic society. Public scholarship arises out of an awareness of civic responsibility and sensitivity to the relationship between education and its real-world application. The academic distinction between research and teaching, while useful, is not a helpful means to stimulate young public intellectuals.

Drawing on ideas informed by human ecological research undertaken among indigenous communities in the circumpolar Arctic and in the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, I offer below a number of pedagogical principles intended to create an enabling environment for young public intellectuals. These principles are biophilia, or love of life; intellectual pluralism; sociocultural and ecological relevance; the creation of an environment for insight; and phronesis, or practical wisdom. I will present three case studies that illustrate how these principles speak truth to power by challenging established metanarratives.

**Principles That Engender Public Intellectuals**

My teaching is framed by human ecological research, and this research, in turn, is inspired by a scholarly teaching environment. Human ecology describes the relationships between people and their environment—including other animals, plants, and their habitat. It is simultaneously a narrative about how human beings develop a sociocultural system on the foundation of their ecological habitat. Simply put, human ecology integrates human beings into the ecological system they inhabit and thus avoids the facile dichotomy between nature and culture. Both my research and my teaching are shaped by my experiences of indigenous communities living at high latitudes (the circumpolar Arctic and the Subarctic) and high altitudes (the Pamir Mountains of Central Asia), who are in the throes of sociocultural and environmental change and are therefore forced to be among the first to develop adaptation strategies for survival. The concept of the Anthropocene is founded on the recognition that the ecological footprint of humanity is now global, such that the impact of activities in industrialized areas is felt even in such seemingly remote regions as the Arctic and the mountains of Central Asia. These regions have sustained the presence of human cultures for many millennia, and their history is integral to the history of human civilization. Historical evidence of thriving settlements of indigenous
peoples in the Americas and the presence of the Silk Road(s) in Central Asia remain a testimony to human adaptation and achievement.

Situated in varying ecological zones sustaining diverse cultures, these regions are in fact deeply illustrative of the fundamental questions that humanity faces regarding life on this planet. While these societies are inextricably entwined with the technological age of the twenty-first century, those who live in them generally pursue livelihoods, such as hunting, gathering, fishing, agriculture, and pastoralism, that place them in a close ecological relationship to the surrounding environment. Historically, these regions have experienced the effects of colonialism and have been at the frontiers of the Cold War. They continue to deal with imperial machinations in the form of outright war or the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources that threatens their ecosystems and thus their long-term survival. The result has been climate change and chronic poverty, to which external factors are primary contributors. These challenges are fundamentally about the well-being of households and communities, both human and non-human. It is no coincidence that the Greek oikos, “household,” is the root of the prefix eco- in both ecology and economics. In a broader sense, the planet is our oikos: it is the dwelling place of humanity. Both economics and ecology continue to have trouble, however, in dealing with complex interconnected systems. Their greatest challenge is the interface of human and non-human communities within their habitats.

**Biophilia**

While the notion of biophilia, namely, love of life or living systems, has been popularized by biologist Edward Wilson (1984), the idea was first articulated by Erich Fromm (1964), who was writing in the context of the excesses of narcissism and war in the twentieth century. Quoting the confrontation between the Basque philosopher Miguel de Unamuno and the fascist general José Millán-Astray at the University of Salamanca on 12 October 1936, Fromm illustrates the significance of the connection between biophilia and scholarship. The day marked the anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of America, and fiery speeches were delivered, including one by Francisco Maldonado, a professor at the university. Decrying Catalan and Basque nationalism as “cancers in the body of the nation,” Maldonado declared that fascism would remove them, “cutting into the live healthy flesh like a resolute surgeon free of false sentimentality.” At that point,
someone in the audience shouted the fascist slogan, “Long live death!” General Millán-Astray responded with “Spain!” and a fascist chant arose. Until that moment, Unamuno, the rector of the university, had been listening silently, but the fascist chant “Long live death!” stirred an immediate and emphatic response. Unamuno rose and, describing the slogan as a “necrophilus and senseless cry,” denounced Millán-Astray, prompting the general to cry out, “Death to intellectuals!” Unamuno then spoke about the university as the “temple of the intellect,” in which “Reason and Right” stand opposed to brute force. Unamuno said: “You will win because you have more than enough brute force. But you will not convince. For to convince you need to persuade. And in order to persuade you would need what you lack: Reason and Right in the struggle.” He vehemently rejected the celebration of death, a characteristic not only of fascists then but of fanatics today, as an “outlandish paradox” that he found “repellent” (Fromm 1964, 37–38). The love of life and its pre-eminence as a value in scholarly engagement drove Unamuno to speak truth to power, even though, in fascist Spain, this power was backed by military force.

As Unamuno’s reference to “Reason and Right” suggests, the ethical dimensions of science cannot be divorced from the practice of the science itself. The current and simultaneously occurring economic, energy, and environmental crises are unparalleled in human history and put all life in peril. These anthropogenic crises are a manifestation of the long-term erosion of the core value of biophilia. It is not sufficient for the university scholar to point out to students that the current predicament is leading to the reckless destruction of life on earth. Rather, it is the role of the scholar to investigate, along with those students, mechanisms that promote the conservation of life and living systems.

**Intellectual Pluralism**

Problems faced by societies and communities rarely present themselves neatly or in reference to a single discipline. Sociocultural and ecological predicaments such as climate change, chronic poverty, environmental degradation, intolerance, and food and energy insecurity are “wicked problems” that transcend disciplinary boundaries. These problems are “wicked” not because they are inherently evil but because they are so complex. First identified in the fields of social planning and systems science, wicked problems defy easy and singular formulations, resist resolution, and are nearly
impossible to solve because of changing circumstances that are difficult to perceive and therefore to understand (Allen and Gould 1986; Balint et al. 2011; Churchman 1967; Rittel and Webber 1973). Complex interdependencies underlie wicked problems, and attempts to solve them reveal or generate further problems. These problems have an emergent quality (Latour 1987) in that they are contingent and highly context dependent. Scientific uncertainty, combined with conflicting perceptions and values, renders an optimal solution to a wicked problem unattainable. Therefore, responses to these problems are neither right nor wrong but rather are evaluated in terms of their degree of effectiveness. Wicked problems demand engagement with cultural systems, social and institutional structures, and individual actions, all within the ecological context in which these problems manifest themselves (Kassam 2009a). Hence, responses to wicked problems have to be collaborative and participatory, involving a diversity of societal perspectives and a willingness to live with the consequences.

Participatory and collaborative approaches to problem solving engender creativity and thoughtfulness in framing solutions. Here, expertise is not sufficient; diversity is both necessary and provides hope. Cognitive diversity is the multiplicity of perspectives that are drawn from different ways of knowing, arising from a variety of livelihood activities, life experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Diversity is subtle, imbued with possibilities, and imminent; therefore, it has emergent properties, much like wicked problems. Diversity simultaneously bridges the present and the past and opens up the future. It carries with it a constant sense of becoming by enabling adaptation to change. Through the collaboration with a variety of social groups, one not only benefits from cultural and social diversity but also gains in terms of cognitive diversity. Cognitive diversity provides the ability to address wicked problems. Cognitive diversity eschews a conception of reality in which nature is reduced to a single principle. Therefore, it rejects absolutist, monolithic, or unitary explanations. Cognitive diversity among a group of problem solvers contributes to the articulation of thoughtful responses to the challenges humanity is encountering. Individual intellectual abilities are not sufficient: the diversity of our experiences and identities must combine with these abilities if we are to address the challenges we face and articulate possible solutions (Kassam 2010a; Page 2007, 2010).

One effective means of preparing future generations to address the wicked problems generated by the Anthropocene is undergraduate and
graduate teaching and applied research. By building bridges across different ways of knowing, scholars draw from the diversity of their cultural backgrounds and variety of life and learning experiences. In this sense, interdisciplinary learning is not only about an ecologist working with an anthropologist but about both of them engaging with a Native hunter to tackle the question of sea ice and food security in the Arctic. Indigenous knowledge is in vital engagement with institutionalized “scientific” knowledge as communities of inquirers (such as students and professors) work with communities of social practice (such as Elders, farmers, hunters, pastoralists, and the institutions of civil society). In applied research, the border between inquiry and practice is transcended: insights resulting from inquiry are applied to human societies and thus provide the foundation for policy formulation and subsequent action. Effective policy and action are best achieved through the participation of communities of practice and inquiry.

Relevance to Sociocultural and Ecological Context
As researchers and teachers, our challenge is to make book learning at universities relevant to the needs of human societies. This requires that the teacher adopt a pedagogical framework that facilitates the transformation of students from those who know about the major challenges of the twenty-first century into those who know how to confront these challenges in particular sociocultural and ecological contexts. This demands that our research activities should inform the content of the courses we teach and our articulation of ideas in the classroom. To place an issue in context, students need to understand that the past is not merely history but is relevant to the present and to future possibilities. The idea of relevance links education to experience, or learning to community, combining critical thinking with research in the service of human societies. The very process of learning must be active and both socially and environmentally engaged in order to stimulate insight and generate practical wisdom (phronesis).

An Environment for Insight
Despite increasingly market-driven conceptualizations of universities as corporate businesses, students are not just “consumers” of information; they are also producers of insight. Advising and teaching is the raison d’être of scholarship, and the university is the context in which insights gained through research are shared. While the publication of that research brings
validation by peers, teaching carries the insights generated by research into the future. Furthermore, nuanced insight and a passion for research are best conveyed in the classroom through one’s own actions and experiences, which make course material come alive in the minds of students. Critical exchange through teaching produces a dynamic that allows ideas to develop and hybridize into a tapestry of possibilities. In addition, questions arising from classroom discussion often open new vistas of research or provide fresh perspectives on old problems. Thomas Kuhn noted in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) that paradigm shifts within a discipline generally emerge from young scholars and from those situated outside the discipline. Kuhn’s observations simultaneously make a case for intellectual pluralism and emphasize the role of the young scholar. This acknowledgement of the importance of young scholars is fundamental, as it speaks to their role in advancing ideas that contribute to the development of public scholarship.

**Phronesis**

Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is the knowledge of how to secure the “ends of human life.” It is about the well-being of the oikos—the place of dwelling and the web of sociocultural and ecological relationships that sustain it. Aristotle describes *phronēsis* as an intellectual virtue in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2004). Aristotle maintained that we grasp the nature of phronesis by observing those who possess it. Although phronesis depends on our ability to reason, unlike theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), it cannot be gained solely through book learning. Phronesis requires practice. By combining critical thinking with practice, students directly experience the way that theoretical perspectives both emerge from and inform the application of their knowledge. In the course of action, the particular hints at the universal.

A conversation about learning without practice is just as vacant as a discussion of rights without responsibilities. Rights such as freedom are intimately linked to responsibilities. An applied perspective on teaching seeks to generate a cadre of young scholars who situate their thinking and ideas in the context of the universe-centered self rather than a self-centered universe. Barber (1994, 88) argued: “The language of citizenship suggests that self-interests are always embedded in communities of action and that in serving neighbors, one also serves oneself.” In other words, self-interested goals do not exist in opposition to community but are realized in the course of engagement with the community.
The pedagogical approach I am describing recognizes that responsibility is embedded in knowledge. It can be characterized as participatory, in accordance with the principles described above. It facilitates constructive and thought-provoking interactions between local communities who hold indigenous knowledge and scholars from biological, physical, and social sciences as well as the humanities. Furthermore, on the basis of two decades of experience as a university scholar, I am convinced that a transdisciplinary approach provides the integrated perspective needed to conduct research related to natural resource utilization, conservation, livelihood security, climate change, and food sovereignty.

**Challenging Metanarratives: Speaking Truth to Power**

Challenging metanarratives—reflecting critically on otherwise unquestioned truths—requires an engagement with power. Described below are three cases in which metanarratives supported by powerful monopolies on knowledge were called into question. The first case illustrates the need for clear thinking and the faculty of empathy when a decision must be made about whether to go to war. The second establishes the importance of intellectual pluralism, or multiple ways of knowing, in addressing critical issues of human survival. The third shows that the retention of diversity even under conditions of significant stress is fundamental to survival. Together, these cases seek to speak truth to power as well as to demonstrate the pedagogical principles described above in action.

**The Public Intellectual: First a Scholar, Then an Activist**

The first case concerns the failure of effective analysis on the part of most (but not all) intelligence agencies to accurately predict the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Both American and British intelligence agencies conveyed to policy makers and political leaders that evidence existed of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In contrast, Canadian intelligence agencies, which depended primarily on data gathered by the American and British, came to the opposite conclusion. After analyzing the information, they maintained that the evidence was inadequate to support such an idea (Campbell 2010). This example is compelling because it closely links the notion of “intelligence” to the role of the “intellectual.” Moreover,
it clearly illustrates that information is not intelligence. Intelligence is the value added the public intellectual provides through effective analysis.

How did American intelligence analysts come to the conclusion that there was evidence of weapons of mass destruction? Their decision was strongly influenced by their own expectations of the policy needs of those who controlled institutions of power, rather than those of the public they served. In theory, the objective of intelligence is to inform policy makers and in this manner support the formulation of policies that will be of maximum benefit to society. However, “support” can also mean providing analyses that reinforce existing policies and rally others to the cause. The Iraq case illustrates the need for attention to basic social science methods in order to avoid cognitive biases. Jervis (2010, 191) argues that by focusing on the dependent variable, analysts “ignored relevant comparisons, overlooked significant negative evidence, and failed to employ the hypothetico-deductive method.” Unless we are careful to abide by scientific methods, we tend to interpret information so that it will accord with what we already believe (or would like to believe). Failing to recognize this, analysts overestimated the extent to which the evidence before them supported their conclusion that Iraq was harbouring weapons of mass destruction.

What did Canadian intelligence analysts do differently, given that they were using the same data as their American and British counterparts? The fact that the conclusions reached by American and British intelligence analysts were erroneous indicates that their approach was flawed. Analysts must develop hypotheses that can be empirically validated. If the proposition is correct, what predictions can be made and what evidence would one expect to be able to gather on the basis of those predictions? Similarly, a scholar would ask what information would cast doubt on, or outright disprove, their conclusions. This type of questioning alerts scholars not to neglect evidence that might falsify their assumptions and to look for areas in which potentially relevant information should be sought. Given the data before them, Canadian analysts thought to ask, What else might this equipment be used for? This approach led them to conclude that the evidence did not necessarily point to the existence of weapons of mass destruction.

Given that human lives and a nation’s resources are at stake in the decision to go to war, this example is compelling illustration of what can happen when power speaks to truth, rather than the other way around. More generally, it is rigorous scholarship that informs the words and
actions of the public intellectual. Activism without sound scholarship is merely a case of the tail wagging the dog. The activist believes first and then seeks evidence to support that belief, whereas the public intellectual begins with the evidence and then bases her or his belief and action on that evidence. This is well illustrated by a conversation between President Bush and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. In his memoirs, Mr. Chrétien recalls that Mr. Bush offered to send his intelligence experts to Ottawa to convince him about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. The prime minister responded, “‘No, don’t do that, George. . . . If you have proof, send it to my analysts through the normal channels. They will look at it, and I will decide” (2008, 309).

This case is, however, fundamentally about biophilia. In the long term, the bloodshed and the damage to the oikos of communities will generate pain, bitterness, and hatred that will continue to fester, undermining biophilia and ultimately leading to more death and destruction. The case of going to war in Iraq also illustrates a basic lack of empathy (Jarvis 2010), which is the cornerstone of biophilia. A significant literature exists on the ethical criteria for preemptive war, and, in the analysis of Franklin Eric Wester (2004), the Bush administration’s justification for war did not live up to these criteria. The fact is that in the age of the Anthropocene, when human action has planetary implications, the notion of preemptive war is not only anachronistic but also ethically vacant. In the case of a conflict, the two parties may have little sympathy for each other’s point of view, but the public intellectual must seek to exercise the faculties of imagination and empathy, in addition to reason. By not doing so, the public intellectual forsakes the ability to perceive the world differently and reason accordingly. In other words, his or her assumptions about the other must reflect who the other actually is.

When a nation’s leaders choose to go to war using arguments of preemptive defence, this implies that they perceive their own might as greater than that of those upon whom they will wage war. Studies show that those who consider themselves powerful reveal a reduced tendency to comprehend how other people see, think, and feel (Galinsky et al. 2006). In essence, the “other” is merely a construction based on their insecurities and motivations. Their myopia, produced primarily by fear, blinds them to the diversity of perspectives and to pluralistic views of the world. In contrast, the public intellectual must have the capacity not only to think but also feel from the
perspective of others. The next case illustrates how human agency is driven by empathy and the way in which multiple ways of knowing, or intellectual pluralism, contributes to survival.

**Intellectual Pluralism and Survival**

In the mid-1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union’s economy, the world’s most industrialized and densely populated polar region found itself facing shortages of food and fuel. On the Kola Peninsula, near the Russian border with Finland, and on the Chukotka Peninsula, across the Bering Sea from Alaska, entire communities were at risk of starving or freezing to death. In Lovozero, a town on the Kola Peninsula, the price of essential food items—when these were available at all—fluctuated as the value of the ruble destabilized. Doctors could diagnose illness, but they lacked the medicines to treat those who were ill, and, even under the best of conditions, hospitals could offer only one meal a day to their patients. Russian government institutions were unable to offer much help, which arrived instead from international institutions and from other indigenous communities. Sami cultural groups from Norway, Sweden, and Finland came to the assistance of the Russian Sami, on the Kola Peninsula, while the Chukchi and Yupik living on the Chukotka Peninsula received aid from Iñupiat, Inuvialuit, and Yupik communities in Alaska (see figure 6.1).

While in some ways similar to other international emergency relief efforts, these empathetic responses were unique in that they involved the transfer of the tools and knowledge required for subsistence hunting and gathering. Far from being a matter of sport, the ability to hunt and fish was essential to feeding members of one’s household and community. In such circumstances, a university degree was of virtually no use. A different kind of learning was necessary—knowledge of how to live off the land and sea. Although some individuals still had the skills needed to maintain a subsistence lifestyle, this ability had been largely neglected and devalued during decades of industrialization and collectivization. When practical and context-specific indigenous knowledge is actively suppressed by colonizing powers, it is in danger of being forgotten. This type of cognitive interruption is colonization of the mind, which seeks to eliminate intellectual pluralism and destroy cultural identity.
To offset decades of Soviet policy that discouraged the use of local resources, Inuit residents of Alaska’s North Slope Borough found it necessary to send supplies and weapons to their neighbours across the Bering Sea. Before Chukotka’s communities could legally hunt marine mammals, however, the Inuit also had to persuade the International Whaling Commission to extend quotas so as to permit subsistence hunting. In addition, for a number of years they invited community leaders, hunters, and scientists from the Chukotka Peninsula to the North Slope Borough to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and the strengthening of local institutions that would serve to safeguard hunters’ rights and their capacity to use local resources effectively. Hunting demands a concomitant commitment to conservation through planning for sustainable resource use.

This case not only illustrates the empathy felt by one indigenous community for another, even across international borders, but also demonstrates how empathy is manifested in practical action. This action involved the revitalization of multiple ways of knowing by building bridges with international institutions, such as the International Whaling Commission.
Commission, and with scientists. By involving scientists as well as hunters, the Inupiat showed practical wisdom (phronesis), which is essential to wise leadership. Intellectual pluralism was sustained by communities of social practice (indigenous leaders, hunters-gatherers, resource managers) working in tandem with communities of inquirers (scientists) in order to address a crisis.

Under conditions of stress, a public intellectual must move from critical analysis to action. To be effective, actions cannot be based solely on one individual’s ability to reason but must instead draw on diverse perspectives. Learning from the example of the Inupiat, the public intellectual must seek to encourage thoughtful action grounded in a collaborative process that incorporates the principle of intellectual pluralism. Only in this way will it be possible to address wicked problems such as food and livelihood insecurity.

**Must Cain Always Kill Abel?**

The Old Testament narrative in which Cain, “a tiller of the ground,” kills his younger brother, Abel, “a keeper of sheep” (Gen. 4:2), out of a jealous impulse has generated social science scholarship that reinforces conflict between farmers and pastoralists. While studies do confirm that conflict sometimes exists between herders and farmers (Bassett 1988; Blench 1984; Chatwin 1989; Gellner 1983; Hodgson 1974; Khaldûn 1967), there is also compelling evidence to the contrary. Despite the prevailing image of Afghanistan as a country riven by religious and ethnic differences, evidence from the Pamir Mountains suggests that ethnic, cultural, religious, and ecological diversity contributes to mutual survival and food security. This is particularly noteworthy given that the country has, for more than thirty years, been ensnared in a localized global war.

The Pamir Mountains lie in northeastern Afghanistan, in the province of Badakhshan, and extend northward into Tajikistan. Immediately to their south, a long, narrow mountain valley, known as the Wakhan Corridor, extends eastward from the central part of Afghanistan into China, and separates Tajikistan, to the north, from Pakistan, to the south (see figure 6.2). Although sparsely populated, the region is home to two distinct ethnic groups, the Kyrgyz and the Wakhi (Felmy and Kreutzmann 2004; Kassam 2010; Kreutzmann 2003; Shahrani 1978, 1979).
Figure 6.2. Location of Wakhi and Kyrgyz ethnic groups

Striking differences exist between the two groups. The Wakhi are primarily sedentary agriculturalists, who practice irrigated crop farming in valleys located between 2,500 and 3,500 metres above sea level. They grow wheat, barley, millet, peas, and even potatoes, although, in villages at higher elevations, the potato harvest is unreliable. Poorer households often lack a supply of grain sufficient for the entire year and must therefore decide whether to save some of their store of grain for seeding or to use it to meet their immediate needs for food. In addition to farming, the Wakhi do keep some animals, which they feed during the winter with farm-produced fodder. The Kyrgyz, in contrast, are largely nomadic pastoralists, who, in the spring and summer, migrate to high pastures to graze their herds. These consist of sheep and goats, which are generally sold in market, as well as yaks, raised for local consumption and transport, and horses, donkeys, and camels, chiefly used for the transport of supplies. Long periods of high-altitude grazing in the spring and summer, combined with shorter grazing periods in lower-lying areas during the winter months, enable the Kyrgyz to draw on natural resources in dispersed locations. In the summer, however,
the Wakhi also make use of high mountain plateaus as pastures. Thus, while each of the two communities occupies a distinct ecological niche, the two niches overlap seasonally, and this overlap of land use during the spring and summer requires cooperation between the two groups.

Diversity in this region exists not only at the level of ecological habitat but also in language and religion. The Wakhi speak a language that belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family, whereas Kyrgyz is a Turkic language of the Altaic family. The Kyrgyz are Sunni Muslims, and the Wakhi are Shia Ismaili Muslims. Historically, the presence of Kyrgyz and Wakhi in the Wakhan region is the outcome of a process of competition among various groups for strategic control of resources. At times, the Wakhi, as Shia Ismaili Muslims, have faced persecution at the hands of Sunni groups who invaded and occupied the region, while the Kyrgyz suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Mongols and, more recently, the Afghan nation.

Given long-term warfare in the region, the hegemony of a fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam under the Taliban, limited arable land in mountainous regions, and religious and ethnic differences, one might expect tensions to exist between the Wakhi and the Kyrgyz. Indeed, historically, there has at times been conflict. Today, however, these two communities in fact engage in close relations that ensure their mutual survival. The Wakhi grow wheat and barley, which they trade with the Kyrgyz, and also mill the grain into flour for the Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz, for their part, respect the pasture lands of the Wakhi and trade animals with them in return for milled grain, as well as trading rope, hide, and other items manufactured from their herds. The Wakhi obtain tea, salt, oil, and other items from the south and occasionally act as middlemen for the Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz employ poorer members of Wakhi households to tend to their livestock, in exchange for animals. Wakhi from Sarhad-i-Broghil sometimes give their yaks (and occasionally camels) to the Kyrgyz for tending in the winter season. For the care of ten yaks, the Kyrgyz may take a one-year-old yak in payment. These interchanges generate strong relations between neighbours.

In contrast to observations from other studies (Shahrani 1979, 192), these findings do not indicate that the Wakhi and Kyrgyz hold each other in contempt on the basis of religious differences. Rather, by occupying complementary ecological niches, these two different Muslim cultures ensure economic resilience and the common good while simultaneously
acknowledging differences. When they are in each other’s territory, hospitality is extended, and they live at each other’s homes while securing supplies and engaging in trade. Kyrgyz and Wakhi who are in regular contact can communicate in either language. Some Wakhi have Kyrgyz names because they were born in or near Kyrgyz pastures. Moreover, the two groups share religious shrines, each drawing inspiration and comfort from its own interpretation of Islam. The Kyrgyz, although among the Sunni majority, have historically faced persecution for not being sufficiently orthodox, while the Wakhi Ismailis—who, as Shia, have historically been targeted as heretics—generally resist the fundamentalist and literalist impulse (Bliss 2006). By recognizing their mutual dependence and viewing their differences as an asset, the two groups have been able to avoid the external pressure from those who seek to impose a narrow and more fanatical interpretation of Islam and maintain a largely peaceful coexistence.

What, then, is the relevance of the Cain and Abel narrative to the case of the Kyrgyz and Wakhi? The jealousy that Cain felt toward his brother is not the issue here: all human beings experience jealousy. What is significant is that, rather than attempting to reflect on his feelings and thus come to terms with them, Cain chose to use violence. More than simply a rejection of the ties of kinship, his slaying of Abel is a denial of his reciprocal connection to his brother, who represents another way of living and thinking. The very idea of mutual reliance is repudiated when Cain is asked, “Where is Abel thy brother?” and, he responds: “I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). Cain’s response is a refusal of the human capacity for biophilia, a concept that one would expect a “tiller of the ground” to uphold. The case of the Kyrgyz and Wakhi is not about the absence of conflict, given that, historically, conflicts have occurred. Furthermore, the two groups live in a country that has been and continues to be torn apart by a bloody civil war supported by global powers beyond its borders. What is instructive is that, despite these long-term stressors, the Kyrgyz and Wakhi choose to act in a manner that supports mutual coexistence and interdependence while safeguarding cultural difference.

How does this case speak to the role of the public intellectual? A scholar must critically engage metanarratives that seek to ignore sociocultural and ecological complexity. The conflict in Afghanistan is generally presented as an open-and-shut case of violence and the intolerance of diversity. While this interpretation is indeed possible, it also conceivable that endless repetitions
of the primordial conflict between Cain and Abel are not inevitable. It is
the role of the public intellectual to uncover complexities and nuances. The
case of the Kyrgyz and Wakhi is informed by intricate relationships between
diverse ecological habitats, variations in livelihood strategies, and socio-
cultural and religious differences. This complex interaction among differ-
ences yields evidence that contradicts the narrative of perpetual conflict.
Instead, it reveals agency at the level of communities—the capacity to act
pragmatically and empathetically. This case is not without similarities to
that of indigenous communities in the Arctic after the collapse of the Soviet
Union. It again illustrates biophilia driven by food security and multiple
ways of knowing, in this case arising from the differing ecological and
sociocultural roles of the Kyrgyz and Wakhi. Simply put, biophilia ignites
empathy, empathy appreciates difference, and difference facilitates survival
in the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan.

Discussion: Prospects for Public Intellectuals

Each of the cases described above speaks to the role of biophilia in securing
the aims of human life as described by Aristotle (2004). The well-being of
the oikos, as the dwelling place of humanity, is central to all three cases.
The examples from the Arctic and from the Pamir Mountains suggest that
the stewardship of the oikos is achieved through practical wisdom (phro-
nesis). Both examples illustrate another way of knowing, and this practice
enabled the continuance of life. In addition, the first case emphasizes the
direct role of the public intellectual in speaking truth to power. The second
case stresses the participatory nature of knowledge generation when com-
munities of social practice work in tandem with communities of inquirers,
of which the public intellectual is a citizen. The third case vividly illus-
trates the fundamental role of both sociocultural and ecological diversity
in facilitating survival. All three cases underscore the relevance of context.
To address an issue effectively, we must take into account the past and
present in order to consider future possibilities, and for this it is essential
that we understand the context. Intellectual pluralism also lies at the core of
all three cases. Engaging and integrating multiple perspectives requires the
capacity not only to reason but also to empathize and imagine. These facul-
ties make it possible to forge connections among diverse ways of knowing,
thinking, and living.
This book rests on the premise that the public space in which intellectuals operate has an impact on democratic political discourse. It is the duty of the university scholar to speak truth to power with grace and humility after substantive research and balanced reflection. It is a truism that the best hope for the preservation of biological and cultural diversity—that is, for safeguarding all the fundamental elements that together constitute life on this planet—is the next generation, our students. Their participation in research is an extension of effective teaching. Our teaching, which should provide an enabling environment for insight, is the foundation for speaking truth to power.

Acknowledgements

Funding for research on the case titled “Intellectual Pluralism and Survival” was provided by the Cooperative Institute for Arctic Research (CIFAR), supported by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association and the Gorbachev Foundation. Funding for research on the case titled “Must Cain Always Kill Abel?” was provided by the Christensen Fund. Morgan Ruelle helped develop figure 6.1 and Keith Jenkins helped develop figure 6.2. I am indebted to the comments of the anonymous readers and the editors of this publication.

Notes

1 “The Grey Monk” is among the poems in the Pickering MS, ca. 1807. I am quoting from Poems and Prophecies (Blake 1991, 332–33).
2 I use the term objective ally to refer to parties that share the same objective while seemingly standing on opposing sides of an issue. Arguably, in the years following 11 September 2001, the Bush administration and Al-Qaida were such objective allies. They used the so-called War on Terror to distract both political leaders and ordinary citizens from the fundamental concerns of the twenty-first century, such as structural poverty, economic and political injustice, and climate change, which take far more human lives and devastate the fabric of families (Kassam 2010b, 244).
3 The oikos is simultaneously a description of the sociocultural and biophysical dwelling place and an articulation of the web of relations among humans and of humans with other plant and animal life and with physical forms such as the land, rivers, and mountains upon which human
livelihoods thrive. The planet is likewise an interconnected system that sustains our livelihoods.

4 This case study emerged from personal communication with intelligence analysts and the Canadian Department of Defence staff present at the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Services (CASIS) Conference in 2010. I have used publicly available documents to present this case.

5 Simply put, the hypothetico-deductive method is basic to scientific method: it involves formulating an hypothesis that would serve to explain observed phenomena and that can be tested—that is, verified or falsified—through experiment. William Whewell (1837, 1840) is often credited with having laid the foundations for the method.

6 This case study, which is drawn from my research in the circumpolar Arctic, was first presented in Biocultural Diversity and Indigenous Ways of Knowing (Kassam 2009a).

7 This case is drawn from the author’s research in the Pamir Mountains of Afghanistan (Kassam 2010a). This research provides a more detailed analysis of evidence of the practice of pluralism among the Kyrgyz pastoralists and Wakhi farmers as well as Pashtu pastoralists and the Shugni farmers. For the sake of brevity, only the Kyrgyz and Wakhi cases are presented here.

References


#### Karim-Aly Kassam 153

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990332.01


———. 1840. The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences, Founded upon Their History. London: John W. Parker, West Strand; Cambridge: J. and J. J. Deighton.
