

Practical Wisdom

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*Wise man said,
"Just find your place
in the eye of the storm"*
- Scorpions

"Wisdom" and "wise" are not words one hears a lot these days. And no wonder: a modern human's day is filled with mundane tasks, noise, gossip, flashing screens, changing weather, i.e. distractions galore. Everyone is so busy, all the time, that no time is left for taking a step back and pausing to think, "Is there a point to any of this?" It seems people are content to carry on this way, because questions like this are hard, so the reward for thinking about them isn't obvious. That is the main obstacle standing in the way to the path of the wise, but overcoming it is nothing short of life-changing.

The virtue of wisdom lies at the heart of human understanding. In fact, philosophy, the discipline concerned with tackling big, hard questions, means "love of wisdom" in Greek. (Oxford English Dictionary) The Greek philosopher Socrates thought that wisdom was the epicenter of all virtues. (Engberg-Pedersen 236) In Ancient Greece, there were two conceptions of wisdom: "phronesis, or practical wisdom, and sophia, or 'transcendental' wisdom." (Pigliucci) The latter is an understanding of the world and one's place in it, while the former might be called prudence – an ability to make sensible decisions in everyday situations.

Similarly, in the early Chinese philosophical tradition, wisdom (zhi) was understood as an extension of knowledge. (Yao 19) Confucianism also contained a dual understanding of wisdom – one as accumulated knowledge acquired by extended study, the other as practical and intuitive. (Raphals 16)

Whether we talk about eternal or practical wisdom, it is quite different from the common "virtues" of today. The wise men and women of former eras have been replaced by

“influencers,” “trendsetters,” “thought leaders,” and “visionaries ” It’s true that many people who bear these labels do sometimes offer deep insights into what makes life fulfilling. But, as the labels suggest, their status is temporary, as they merely rent, but never own, the platforms from which they spread their ideas. Wisdom, by contrast, does not depend on and is not influenced by trends or current events happening on the surface. Wisdom lies at the core – eternal and unchanging.

I realized the importance of wisdom at an early age, as I was fortunate to have two wise women in my life – my mother and grandmother. Learning from them, I have come to understand that wisdom is about restraint. So when I “practice wisdom,” what I’m actually doing is restraining myself from giving in to emotions, impulses, and judgment of others. This, in turn, requires the ability to distance myself from my immediate and subjective perception of a situation and to instead take a view based on common human experience.

One type of situation that I have learned to approach wisely is conflicts. For example, one time I took a class where most of the work was done in groups throughout the semester. There was a classmate in my group who would constantly “free ride” on the work of everyone else. Yet when I asked her for help, she would always find an excuse to avoid extra work. If I had found myself in this situation in the past, my impulse would be to “teach her a lesson” – refuse to share my work with her, speak badly of her to others, or tell her that she’s selfish and inconsiderate. But one piece of wisdom I’ve learned from my mother is that people learn only the lessons they want to learn, not the lessons imposed on them. So the wise choice I made with my classmate was not to seek revenge, complain, or get offended. Instead, I drew conclusions on how to avoid conflict and still solve my problem: I either turned to my other groupmates who were more willing to help or just figured out the solution myself.

Of course, there are times when I'm so caught up in the moment that acting wisely is simply impossible. Certain family matters, relationship problems, and issues with close friends can stir up emotions that utterly possess me, preventing me from seeing the situation objectively, at a distance. In those moments, my feelings are like a wall beyond which I cannot step, and I'm a prisoner of my predicament. But I find that what's really important is to reflect on these experiences once they are over and take away some lessons on how to handle them better the next time around.

Another challenge in practicing wisdom is that it can be at odds with another important human characteristic – intuition. In a way, intuition is also a form of wisdom – the collective wisdom of our ancestors that's programmed into us by evolution. So perhaps what people with “good intuition” are actually good at is tapping clearly into that inner voice of the millennia of generations that have preceded us.

But our ancestors' experience, while telling, isn't necessarily to be replicated in our generation. Wisdom, in the traditional sense, is rigidly rational, while intuition is emotional, a feeling of finding the right way with a sense that behind us are the infinite crowds of the people that have ever inhabited this earth. Ultimately, real wisdom is knowing when to practice self-distancing and self-viewing from the perspective of the society at large, and when to follow the inner voice. But this is a lifelong learning process refined by experience, and the important thing is not to give up on it.

To this end, I strive to practice wisdom in a systematic way by setting aside some time each week to get away from all distractions and reflect on the hard questions. Sometimes I do this at home, but my favorite is to go for long walks out in nature. Removed from crowds and the daily hustle, I quickly feel at peace with the world, and when I return, I carry that tranquility with

me. This practice also helps me in the most challenging circumstances, for I know that, no matter how chaotic life gets, there is always a place I can go where silence, stillness, and harmony rule.

Thus, over the years, I've also become better at recognizing when my emotions are about to get the best of me. Now I'm frequently able to contain my worst impulses by stopping, taking a breath, and asking myself, "What is really going on here?" I imagine a stream of water that has run up to a dam, at which point either the dam breaks or the stream recedes or flows elsewhere. Since breaking the dam is usually impossible, pointless, or counterproductive, I choose to go around or walk away.

There are many benefits to this approach. The most obvious is avoiding confrontation and thus sparing myself a lot of stress and negative feelings toward others. I also take satisfaction in that I am able to skillfully manage my impulses, which reinforces the sense that I am a productive team member and a positive person that is tough to unsettle. But perhaps the most valuable gain from practicing wisdom is the understanding that people are different, and just because I see things a certain way doesn't mean everyone else does.

A life of wisdom is a more fulfilling life and one more resilient to outside shocks. Cultivating wisdom allows me to understand the implications of my actions and the consequences of reacting to the actions of others. It gives a baseline of inner peace, a blank screen onto which life events are projected, with me as the sole audience member. And just like in the movies, where images may move us, capture us, inspire us, but the screen stays the same, never taking sides, never judging – so is wisdom a virtue that bows its head to the universe, acknowledging the mystery of its origin and meaning. It is thus we find our place in the eye of the storm, surrendered to it and content to be there.

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