

Living a Life of Wisdom

Small Groups: April 2014

Lyricist David Pomerantz writes, “It’s in every one of us to be wise,” yet few of us really think of ourselves as wise. In my pastoral care work, I have often encouraged clients and congregants to get in touch with their inner wisdom – their deepest knowing about what is true and right.

I believe that we all have a “wise self.” That wise self is the part of us that absorbs the wisdom of those we particularly admire or respect, perhaps without our conscious awareness. Your wise self accumulates information and ideas through reading, listening, and observing, through spiritual practices, via inspirational stories, images, and experiences. All these things contribute to the formation of a wise self that lets you get in touch with the “big picture.” The ability to see the big picture is one definition of wisdom. Seeing that big picture gives people a better perspective for making the right decisions in tough circumstances.

How do we access this wise self? One simple way is to ask yourself what you would tell a friend who is in the exact same situation that challenges or worries you. Often, when we sincerely consider what advice we would give a good friend, our wise self speaks up to guide us in our own lives.

How do we cultivate inner wisdom? In her article “Looking at Wisdom from Mid-life,” Dr. Kathryn Betts suggests that we adopt personal strategies to remain “informed, open, compassionate, self-reflective, and engaged in the physical world.” Dr. Betts asks the following questions (adapted):

- * Do you stay informed by paying attention to reliable news sources?
- * Do you continue to learn new things on a regular basis?
- * Do you stay in contact with others (especially people unlike yourself in some significant way)?
- * Do you consider opinions different from your own?
- * Do you avoid jumping to conclusions and seek to weigh a variety of ideas and explanations before forming an opinion or making a decision?
- * Do you nurture compassion and empathy by consciously trying to imagine others’ needs and points of view?
- * Do you regularly engage in some form of self-reflection, especially to help process difficult situations and feelings? (e.g. meditation or prayer, journaling, art or discussion with trusted others.)
- * Do you routinely get “unplugged” and leave technology behind for a while in order to have real embodied experiences that keep you in touch with a wide range of emotions? (e.g. exercise, music, art, creative cooking or crafts, sexual intimacy, dance, play with children or pets, nature.)

I hope that you can answer “yes” to many of the questions above. Your yes responses help you connect with your wise self. Our congregation is a home for wisdom seekers. Each of us can discover our own truths and learn from others. As we share our journeys, we grow in spirit and in wisdom. We might even say that at UUCP, we are wising up!

May you find wisdom within and around you as a part of this community,
Rev. Linda

Living the Theme: Experiencing Wisdom

Use these exercises to reflect on how you experience wisdom and what living a life of wisdom might mean to you. Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience wisdom and what you learned from the practice.

Many of the quotations in our packet speak to the importance of reflection and stillness as being a part of discovering or uncovering, or even cultivating wisdom. Therefore, our two exercises this month are invitations to reflect.

1. The Hebrew poet and philosopher, Solomon ibn Gabriol, says, “We are wise only while in search of wisdom; when we imagine we have attained it, we are fools.” Part of the challenge of wisdom is to claim ourselves wise isn’t very humble. And yet I know we all have a good deal of wisdom inside of us. It is indeed, in every one of us, to be wise. So take 30 minutes one time this week, or longer if you wish and try to write down some of the wisdom, some of the learnings, some of the wise words or wisdom sayings that you try to let guide your living. What is the wisdom, what are the wise words in you (even if they may come from others, but you have discovered them to be true in your own life)?

2. Take 30 minutes one day this month to write down the names of people who have given you some wisdom in your life, or who you look to as wise persons. What kinds of things did they teach you, what lessons seemed wise? Or how did they live, what did they do that left you with an impression of their wisdom?

Are there lessons or examples on this list that you try to model in your own life, lessons you try to carry forward? Are there qualities or lessons you want to cultivate or incorporate more into your life? Come to your group ready to share something from this exercise that really sticks with you, something you want to remember.

Some Questions to Think and Talk About

As always, don't treat these questions as "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find one that "hooks" you most. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into - and break open - your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your small group prepared to share that journey with the group.

1. How do you define wisdom? What is it? What qualities does it, or people who have it, exhibit?
2. What are the differences or similarities between wisdom and knowledge – if any? Are they related, and if so, how? Is one harder to gain than the other?
3. Who in your life have you seen as wise and what lessons did you learn from them?
4. Is wisdom something only for human beings? Can animals be wise? Is there wisdom in nature and if so, how would you describe it?
5. Do you agree or disagree with the following quote? "Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish...Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it." Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*
6. How do you think people become wise? Think of someone you consider to be wise. What qualities or characteristics made them wise and how do you think they became wise?
7. Aeschylus in *Agamemnon* asserted that wisdom comes only through suffering. Do you agree or disagree and why?
8. If not suffering (or in addition to suffering) what else makes us wise? Does age make us wise, no matter what? Does adversity make us wise? Does study make us wise? What about community?
9. Was there a time in your life when you felt like you gained a lot of wisdom, or felt you grew wiser? What were the circumstances? Why do you think this was a time of growing in wisdom?
10. Can we foster wisdom in our children? If so, how might we do this?
11. Can people be wise in one context and unwise in another, or is wisdom a deeper attribute that, once gained, is visible in all contexts?
12. What wisdom were you taught as a child that is still useful to you?
13. If you could pass on one bit of wisdom to young people, what would it be?
14. What was the best piece of wisdom, or the wisest advice you ever received?
15. What wisdom have you gained from participation in Small Groups? Have there been pieces of wisdom you have found in these circles, or wisdom you have seen in others in your group?

Recommended Resources

These are **not** required reading. We will not dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started and offer different ways to see and explore the theme.

First Thoughts and Wise Words

Wisdom (noun):

- knowledge that is gained by having many experiences in life
- the natural ability to understand things that most other people cannot understand
- knowledge of what is proper or reasonable : good sense or judgment
- knowledge of what is true or right coupled with just judgment as to action; discernment, or insight.
- the trait of utilizing knowledge and experience with common sense and insight

“Wisdom begins in wonder” - Socrates

“To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their primitive forms - this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religion.” - Albert Einstein, *The Merging of Spirit and Science*

“Want what you have.
Be who you are.
Do what you can.”
- UU Minister, the Rev. Forrest Church

“You Reading This, Be Ready”
by William Stafford

Starting here, what do you want to remember?
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened
sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world
than the breathing respect that you carry
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting
for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this
new glimpse that you found; carry into evening
all that you want from this day. This interval you spent
reading or hearing this, keep it for life –

What can anyone give you greater than now,
starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

Without courage, wisdom bears no fruit.
- Baltasar Gracian

Nine-tenths of wisdom consists in being wise in time.
- Theodore Roosevelt

Life is the only real counselor; wisdom unfiltered
through personal experience does not become a part of
moral tissue. - Edith Wharton

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.
- Confucius

Wisdom comes with the ability to be still. Just look and just listen. No more is needed. Being still, looking, and listening activates the non-conceptual intelligence within you. Let stillness direct your words and actions.
- Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks*

“Wisdom is defined as the trait of utilizing knowledge and experience with common sense and insight. This definition epitomizes my understanding of wisdom: it's the intelligent application of knowledge and insight. So by its definition, wisdom encompasses all the other virtues we've explored in our monthly themes.”
- Worship Associate

“Knowledge can be "bought" through degrees, the internet and so forth -- but wisdom must be "earned.” There is something sage about it, something common-sensical and very practical. Something "battle-worn" and proven about wisdom. It goes much deeper than pure knowledge. Perhaps this is similar to the difference between data and analysis, or data and application? Note from Bloom's Taxonomy, a scale of "learning" (from rote memorization to analysis and problem-solving).”
- Small Group Facilitator

Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. When people really listen to each other in a quiet fascinated attention, the creative fountain inside each of us begins to spring and cast up new thoughts and unexpected wisdom. - Brenda Ueland

Like water in the desert is wisdom to the soul.
- Edward Counsel, *Maxims*

So much of our own understanding of our depth occurs later in life, also amid suffering. The theologian Paul Tillich has a great essay in "Shaking the Foundations" in which he observes that during moments of suffering, people discover they are not what they appeared to be. The suffering scours away a floor inside themselves, exposing a deeper level, and then that floor gets scoured away and another deeper level is revealed. Finally, people get down to the core wounds and the core loves.
- David Brooks, "The Deepest Self"

Memory is the mother of all wisdom. - Aeschylus

The kind of man who always thinks that he is right, that his opinions, his pronouncements, are the final word, when once exposed shows nothing there. But a wise man has much to learn without a loss of dignity. - Sophocles

Wisdom is a treasure, the key whereof is never lost.
- Edward Counsel, *Maxims*

We are wise only while in search of wisdom; when we imagine we have attained it, we are fools.
- Solomon ibn Gariol

Never, no, never did Nature say one thing and Wisdom say another. - Edmund Burke

Second thoughts are ever wiser. - Euripides, *Hippolytus*

Knowledge is flour, but wisdom is bread.
- Austin O'Malley,
Keystones of Thought

Wisdom and folly are equal before the face of Infinity, for Infinity knows them not.
- Leonid Andreyev, "Lazarus"

Wisdom is not communicable. The wisdom which a wise man tries to communicate always sounds foolish... Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it.
- Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*

Knowledge is proud that he has learn'd so much;
Wisdom is humble that he knows no more.
- William Cowper, *The Task*

What wisdom can you find that is greater than kindness?
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*

A wise man ... proportions his belief to the evidence.
- David Hume

In youth men are apt to write more wisely than they really know or feel; and the remainder of life may be not idly spent in realizing and convincing themselves of the wisdom which they uttered long ago.
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, preface, *The Snow-Image*

The road to true wisdom has seldom been spanned by mortals. - Edward Counsel, *Maxims*

Each of us knows all. We need only open our minds to hear our own wisdom. - Dan Brown, *Angels & Demons*

The first and wisest of them all professed to know this only, that he nothing knew.
- John Milton, *Paradise Regained*

You may not have very much sense. But if you have enough to keep your mouth shut and look wise, it will not be long before you acquire a wide reputation as a fountain of Wisdom.
- Robert Elliott Gonzales, *Poems and Paragraphs*

Justice without wisdom is impossible. - James Anthony Froude, *Short Studies on Great Subjects*

The wealth of mankind is the wisdom they leave.
- John Boyle O'Reilly, "Rules of the Road"

If we drink from the fountain of wisdom, we thirst for its waters e'ermore. - Ardelia Cotton Barton

from a Small Group Facilitator: Nonattachment and liberation are, in poetry, often associated with old age because the years bring --- in any case, they should bring --some wisdom, as in this poem by a Japanese poet:

Old Man At Leisure

Sacred or secular
manners and conventions
make no difference to him
Completely free
leaving it all to heaven
he seems a simpleton
No one catches
a glimpse inside
his mind
this old man
all by himself
between heaven and earth

by Muso Soseki, trans. from Japanese by W.S. Merwin, in *A Book of Luminous Things* by Czeslaw Milosz

Insights from myth, dreams, and intuitions, from glimpses of an invisible reality and from perennial wisdom provide us with hints and guesses about the meaning of life and what we are here for. Prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action are the means through which we grow and find meaning.

-Jean Shinodo Bolen

We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future.

- George Bernard Shaw

Wisdom consists of the anticipation of consequences.

- Norman Cousins

Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens. - Jimi Hendrix

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

- The Serenity Prayer (Reinhold Niebuhr)

“Will people ever be wise enough to refuse to follow bad leaders or to take away the freedom of other people?”

- Eleanor Roosevelt, *This is My Story*

“There are some things you can’t learn at any university, except for one, the University of Life...the only college where everyone is a permanent student.”

- E.A. Bucchianeri, *Brushstrokes of a Gadfly*

“A wise old owl sat on an oak.

The more he saw the less he spoke.

The less he spoke the more he heard.

Why aren’t we like that wise old bird?”

My father often quoted this to me, source otherwise unknown - Small Group Facilitator

All that glitters is not gold. -- Latin Proverb

Nothing is so full of mystery as patience

- Chinese proverb

Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

- The Golden Rule

Haste makes waste - folk wisdom

Honey catches more flies than vinegar - folk wisdom

A penny saved is a penny earned - folk wisdom

Life is what happens when we are making other plans.

- Thomas LaMance

Consistency is a deadly foe to progress

- Ralph W. Emerson

One day at a time - AA slogan

First things first - AA slogan

Just do it...AA slogan

Online Articles, Videos and Podcasts

From The New York Times, “The Science of Older and Wiser.” The definition of wisdom may be hard to pin down precisely, but for those who have it, aging will be a pleasure.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/13/business/retirementspecial/the-science-of-older-and-wiser.html>

Ted Talk, Barry Schwartz on our loss of wisdom

http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_our_loss_of_wisdom

Leo Tolstoy’s “The Three Questions” short story:

<http://www.online-literature.com/tolstoy/2736/>

David Brooks “The Deepest Self” New York Times

<http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/opinion/brooks-the-deepest-self.html?ref=todayspaper&r=0&referrer=>