

# Wisdom

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The College motto is 'Let Wisdom Guide': but what is wisdom?

Wisdom is a recognizable attribute of human beings, reflected in their thoughts, words and actions, derived through intuition and through individual contemplation of ideas, knowledge and experience of all kinds. The definition is conventional, and says something. But what is wisdom?

Erik Erikson, in his seminal work *Childhood and Society*,<sup>1</sup> describes wisdom as a 'basic virtue' and lists it as the lasting outcome of the 'favourable ratio' associated with the eighth and final psychosocial stage of development in his so-called 'epigenetic' life-cycle: the stage of Ego Integrity versus Despair. Wisdom, Erikson avers, is the hoped-for outcome of the crisis of old age. He associates it with 'acceptance of one's one and only life-cycle as something that had to be'; he allies wisdom in this context with renunciation. But this is as far as he goes. So what is wisdom?

In the conventional mind of the common man or woman, wisdom is associated with knowledge, perhaps great knowledge. A comparison of the two is helpful. *Knowledge* deals with information derived through our sensory organs. Information codified in words, for example, must be touched (braille), seen or heard. Furthermore, knowledge is concerned with the temporal and material dimensions of the universe, with what is measurable; and these aspects are dynamic, changing constantly: knowledge is therefore infinite. Further still, we may acquire knowledge and then lose it again—as it becomes either forgotten or superseded. (Think, for example, of the telephone number of a house in which you once lived.) *Wisdom*, on the other hand, deals with information already in mind, so we presume; with information that is brought to consciousness not through the senses but through intuition. It is aided not by observation but by contemplation. It is concerned with values and abstractions, not lending either itself or its subject matter to quantification. Wisdom is to some degree concerned with the organization of knowledge. It is, we suppose, timeless and constant. It has the characteristic of appropriateness to the entirety of a situation. When gained, it tends to imbue the entire personality. Who can say if it is ever lost?

Wisdom and common sense are not the same. As 'Let Common Sense Guide' is not our motto, it behoves us to distinguish between the two. The difference lies between natural wisdom, which is absolute, and conventional wisdom, which is relative. These unfamiliar concepts are difficult to grasp. *Natural* wisdom has the quality of incontrovertibility: it brooks no argument. It answers questions with silence, for it is beyond words.<sup>2\*</sup> Being beyond words, it is mysterious and void. Being appropriate, it is new-seeming and fresh. *Conventional* wisdom, on the other hand, relates not to any

Absolute Truth but to relative truths. It may be expressed in words, in statements that are—advisedly—qualified (e.g.: 'It is usually the case . . .'; 'In my opinion . . .', etc.). It is concerned with classes of situation that recur commonly, thus it seems often to lack freshness and originality. Common sense is sanctioned by popular consensus. It is generally considered to represent safety in thought and action, yet it affords little protection against foolishness. Which of us lays claim to natural wisdom only?

By and large, we take pride in common sense. Our lives are rooted in convention. We are, conventionally, happy. Thus, we may ask ourselves whether it is wise to try and grapple with such difficult concepts. Common sense would have it that there could be much to lose, if only peace of mind, and nothing to gain but needless strife and worry. Each must decide whether to pursue wisdom or to rely as hitherto on common sense. Each should decide. The College motto nags us—what are we to do?

Furthermore, the decision to be made is not straightforward. It is not a simple question of discriminating and then choosing between natural and conventional wisdom once and for all. The process has to continue indefinitely, moment by moment. Put bluntly this means that the individual, in order to surpass convention consistently, has not only to recognize wisdom but has actually to become wise. Indolent passivity will not suffice: constant awareness is called for. Is this not beyond the capacity of any of us?

The search for wisdom is a personal quest, lonely and painful at times, so it would seem. And in this troubled world wise men to guide us are rare. So there is apparent more reason for some among us to take up the challenge, within the boundaries of our work, and join the natural leaders of our community. Indeed, in declaring boldly 'Let Wisdom Guide', not only to ourselves but also to others who may seek our aid, some would say we have already elected ourselves among the champions of the common people. Individually we must take responsibility for choosing our profession and, if we agree, seeking wisdom—seeking to become wise—is one of our first duties. Seeking knowledge, even great knowledge, is essential, and yet at the same time subordinate to this. Where will we find the strength for such a difficult quest?

As Erikson would have it, all virtue, strength and courage included, comes naturally and spontaneously throughout a successful life-cycle, in which all crises are weathered satisfactorily. The impatient have only to be patient: the elderly

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\* Lao Tsu writes in *Tao Te Ching* (Verse 1):  
The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

meditate on inevitability and grow wise. But, where can we turn in our youth?

The wise men of antiquity give us clues. Wisdom, we are told, is centred on humanity but transcends the individual. Likewise, the sage is centred on himself but is aware of all around him. He is involved, but he is also detached.<sup>3\*</sup> His wisdom is twinned with Compassion. 'The pain and joy of one are, inescapably, the pain and joy of all': this is the great truth on which he meditates, full realization of which he declares to be the source of his wisdom, the source of his compassion, the source of his detachment, his strength, his courage, his optimism, his integrity, his serenity and his joy. Wisdom without compassion is false: compassion without wisdom leads only to exhaustion: both are folly. This is what the sage teaches, gently and with tolerance. He teaches this to guide us. Which of us will turn away?

Strength, peace, joy and wisdom come from within ourselves and from the infinity around us of which we are part, of which we are integral—so say the Ancient Ones. If their wisdom reflects truth, where anyway could there be for us to turn?

As medical men and women, we are witnesses to suffering first, healers second. Perhaps natural, innate wisdom prompted us in the past to take up the work, and prompts us

\* An example from Chuang Tsu's *Inner Chapters* is as follows: 'The mind of a perfect man is like a mirror. It grasps nothing. It reflects but does not hold. Therefore, the perfect man can act without effort'.

now to continue in it. Perhaps some part of us knows that here we are given a fine opportunity to see, recognize, experience and make real for ourselves in the fullest sense possible the first part, at least, of a great truth, thus: 'The pain of one is to be shared, inescapably, by all'. If we are at one with the wise men of old, we know ourselves to be blessed. Aware of half the truth, surely in time we will be vouchsafed knowledge of its complement. Pain and joy: when we accept both equally, wisdom follows. Wisdom follows and wisdom guides. If we allow it. In stillness and silence, wisdom surrounds us. For ordinary men and women, these are extra-ordinary ideas. They provoke anxiety. If serenity is paramount they may be better left alone. Yet together with wisdom comes confidence; confidence facilitates modesty; confidence and modesty in turn attract the trust of others who may come spontaneously to us for help. Trust breeds faith—and faith, hope. Bearing the faith and hope of others we deserve, and live up to, our motto. What is wisdom? Have we not answered this yet? Each who seeks will find their answer. Faith and hope have been mentioned. I would say wisdom is Love.

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>ERIKSON, E. (1950) *Childhood and Society*. New York: W. W. Norton.  
<sup>2</sup>LAO TSU (c 600 BC) *Tao Te Ching*. Translated in 1973 by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. London: Wildwood House.  
<sup>3</sup>CHUANG TSU (c 400 BC) *Inner Chapters*. Translated in 1974 by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. London: Wildwood House.

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## **'In Dublin's Fair City': The Mentally Ill of 'No Fixed Abode'**

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In 1977 a number of considerations prompted a review of the facilities for the mentally ill of 'no fixed abode' in St Brendan's Hospital, Dublin. At that time the hospital had three clinical teams who serviced three geographically distinct catchment areas within the city and attended to the needs of patients with 'no fixed abode' on a rotational basis. There were complaints from community care agencies concerned with the care of the homeless which alleged that patients were discharged without adequate preparation or follow-up. However, this view was not shared by hospital staff, who instanced occasions when patients sought help in what seemed to be a psychiatric or social emergency, and then abused the service by discharging themselves shortly afterwards. The truth perhaps lay somewhere in between. Another complaint was that no single medical practitioner was clearly responsible for these disadvantaged individuals, thereby making it difficult for community care agencies to liaise with the hospital staff.

Some change in existing practices was considered

necessary. However, the direction and momentum of change had to be considered within the context of financial and spatial constraints. Further, it was felt that plans for an acceptable service for the homeless could be formulated only after assessing: (a) the number of patients utilizing the services; (b) past utilization rates—against which projections for the future could be made; and (c) the nature and extent of the range of concurrent psychiatric, medical and/or social problems often found in this group of patients. Unfortunately, the hospital statistics were unhelpful in identifying the numbers of homeless who came into hospital. In these statistics, the homeless were placed in a category referred to as 'others', which referred to a heterogeneous group of individuals admitted to hospital from outside the defined catchment areas for a variety of reasons. Despite reassurances that this 'others' category consisted almost exclusively of homeless individuals, it was felt that statistical inferences drawn from this ambiguous grouping would not be acceptable.