

Wisdom: A Lost Art

By Mel Schwartz

Intellect and knowledge are highly revered in our society. In our worshipping of the expert, we tend to defer to the opinions of those with the highest purported intellect and most knowledge. Perhaps the only things that we hold in equal regard are money and success.

Intellect refers to the ability to grasp and retain information already in existence. To a large degree such knowledge suggests the capacity to store and process information, much as a computer does. The problem with intellect, however, is that it is not necessarily active. It synthesizes data and often permits us to predict outcomes with some measure of accuracy. But it somehow doesn't provide us with the tools to live well. Contrary to our assumptions, there is perhaps a questionable correlation between knowledge and happiness. The dizzying rate of new information has not substantially improved our world as witnessed by the current state of affairs. Knowledge without wisdom is not only ineffective it can be lethal.

The problem begins quite early in life. We propel our children off into the world of education in an attempt to help them in part to secure high grades in order to succeed. Our children's grades are purported to reflect measures of intelligence and we assume that higher measures of intellect will result in more successful lives. This system of child rearing and education is regrettably somewhat myopic. For it focuses primarily on the digesting of facts and details and entirely omits some of the most important lessons of life. Issues such as emotional well being and successful relationships are not addressed in school and not likely spoken about at home. The underlying assumption is that if we gain enough bits of information, we can live well.

But nowhere in our lives are we mentored on how to live well. The ability to live well requires wisdom. Wisdom gives us the capacity to interact with our environment and ourselves in authentic and non-destructive ways. Wisdom permits us to open our hearts and live with joy. Intelligence focuses on matters of correct and incorrect. Wisdom concerns itself with much more sublime issues; matters of the heart and soul. It pertains to living with integrity and honoring all that surrounds us. Compassion is a key component of wisdom. Intelligence pays scant attention to compassion. Wisdom embraces compassion.

When intelligence is accompanied by wisdom we have the foundation for living with purpose and integrity. Without wisdom, intelligence is simply information. It isn't alive if we don't learn how to integrate knowledge in a manner that permits us to actualize happier lives. Wisdom unfolds from the processes of deep dialogue and inquiry. If we simply search for the right answers there is no inquiry. The inquiry asks why is this the right answer? What are the implications of this path? What differing questions should we be asking? Wisdom looks with concern at the results of our actions and sees the bigger picture, whereas intelligence tends to fragment with tunnel vision and sees only the

immediate goal.

In traditional cultures the mentor served as the purveyor of wisdom. The elders who had attained wisdom through their life experiences communicated these gems to the younger generation. This type of relationship is rare and most difficult to find in Western culture. Everywhere we are confronted with experts, bombarding us with ever-increasing particles of new data. This doesn't help us live better. In fact, it impedes joy. The only facsimile of a mentor in our world might be the psychotherapist. Even then, psychotherapists are trained to avoid giving opinions least of all advice, so the mentoring isn't quite active. After all, who mentored the psychotherapist? The answer is likely no one. They were simply trained in a way of thinking.

As our children leave our homes to enter into the world we need to reprioritize the values and lessons of their education. Wisdom is no longer imparted by elders, but can be made part of our education. For many years I was invited to give talks at my son's high school on matters of relationship and emotional intimacy. One of the points that I offered is that we must teach these life lessons in school, rather than trying to fix or medicate people for the ensuing sense of failure and pain they may experience decades later. To my surprise and delight, I recently noticed that a course in relationship was now being offered in our high school. Parents must insist that this be part of the educational curriculum. In fact, it should be a core foundation. Courses on self-esteem, anger and relationship are amongst most valuable pieces of wisdom to be gathered in our quest for knowledge.

Wisdom is very different from making correct responses and attaining excellent grades. Wisdom is contemplative. It thrives in the arena of safe inquiry, free of judgment and the notion of silly questions or wrong answers. Contemplation, or the suspending of quick and measured responses so endemic in our world, honors the human spirit. We need to learn the wisdom that will help us thrive in our relationships and flourish in our lives. No one is teaching wisdom. It's time that we start.

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