

“Developing Personal Wisdom”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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When you hear the word wisdom what does it mean to you? More specifically, what does personal wisdom mean to you? Is it something you could easily explain to another person? When you think about your definition of wisdom, do you consider yourself to be wise?

As I began preparing to write this morning’s sermon, I found myself asking variations of each of these questions. I went to the dictionary on the first two questions and, as is typical, I found several descriptions of what wisdom does or has meant. One of the definitions was quite specific and narrow, “scholarly knowledge or learning.” I am reasonably confident I could explain this definition to almost anyone. This definition, however, isn’t what comes to my mind when I typically think of wisdom. When I think of wisdom, I imagine something that encompasses considerably more than just scholarly knowledge or learning. My understanding of wisdom, and more specifically personal wisdom, fits a more expansive definition from the dictionary. This definition involves the “power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on knowledge, experience, understanding, etc.”

As I sat with this definition and the third question I posed previously I began wondering. How effective might I be at explaining this type of wisdom let’s say to an adolescent who was trying to make a decision regarding some important issue they found themselves struggling with? I began to question how capable I would be in such a situation. Could I find, as this definition states, “the soundest course of action” in my attempts to convey this idea of wisdom to a youth seeking to make a decision they would later consider wise? While considering such a scenario, the final question popped into my mind. How wise do I consider myself to be? Do I consider myself wise enough to stand before all of you and claim to know what it takes to develop personal wisdom? My response was clear and immediate. What was going on in my head when I came up with the title for this sermon? Clearly the months-long sinus infection I have been dealing with muddled my brain and compromised my good judgement. Hopefully my inner wisdom will rise to the challenge that my compromised brain has set for me today.

So now the time has come to speak to you on the topic my clouded brain came up with. Where to begin? What better place to start than the sources our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition draws from. You will find these sources, along with our Seven Principles, on the back of your order of service. Today I want to focus on two of these Six Sources. The Third Source speaks directly to where we can turn in our quest to develop personal wisdom. It instructs us to seek “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life.” I also want to direct attention to our Fifth Source, which states; “humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” Together, these two Sources invite us to seek wisdom in both religion and in science.

Our reading this morning, from a “New York Times” article titled “We Aren’t Built to Live in the Moment,” fits well with our Fifth Source. Martin E. P. Seligman, a psychologist and one of the authors of this article, sites recent scientific findings to challenge the name our species has been given, *Homo sapiens*, meaning “wise man.” To me, the challenge that is being put forth in this article isn’t just to the name. The article also seems to challenge what could be consider idolatries of the mind that underpin the assumptions in this name. One of those assumptions is that we are “wise man.” It seems evident to me that the wisdom of the person who came up with the name for our species, or at the very least their sensibilities, were questionable. The name gives short shrift to the female gender of our species. That subject is worthy of its own sermon or even multiple sermons at some future time.

The article also challenges what the authors assert have been the assumptions of many researchers in the social sciences over the past century. The assumptions that humans are “prisoners of the past and the present.” The article claims that “the power of prospecting is what makes us wise.” I am glad the authors acknowledged that this power of prospecting has a flip side since it can also take us into depression or anxiety. Reactions to the spread of the coronavirus clearly demonstrate some of the potential downsides of having the

power of prospection. And if you have ever experienced significant depression or anxiety, you are well aware that wisdom seems in short supply when we find ourselves engulfed in either.

I want to shift the focus now from the wisdom that can come from science, to the wisdom that can be found in religion. Having undertaken a course of scholarly study regarding several of the world's major religions, I have a level of knowledge that, in the narrow definition cited earlier, would indicate I have some wisdom in this area. I will admit, however, that the more I study religion, the more I discover how much I don't know or understand. The specific religion I want to focus on here is Buddhism.

Certain foundational teachings of Buddhism are quite different than what is being asserted in our reading. The Buddha, very much like science, engaged in a search for truth. It is said that his quest for truth led him to enlightenment. In my study of Buddhist scriptures I have found numerous references to what a person who is on a quest for truth and enlightenment must be able to accomplish. Such a person, according to these writings and teachings, must be able to be fully and completely in the moment, unattached to the past or the future. This seems to be in direct contrast to what we heard in our reading.

Yet in spite of the apparent contradiction, it seems to me that wisdom is contained in both perspectives. Now we will find out if I have the capability of bringing the contradiction I just pointed out together. Will I be able to show the wisdom that these two perspectives hold in common. You will be the judge.

From what is written about the Buddha's search for truth and meaning, it seems clear that prior to his enlightenment he demonstrated just what our reading asserts. He recognized that there were aspects of what was true about his existence and the causes of suffering that he didn't know. He also contemplated the future and imagined that it was possible for him to attain awareness of the truth. From that perspective of looking to the future and what it might hold, it is told that the Buddha sat down at the base of the Bodhi tree vowing not to leave that place until he attained what he was seeking.

There is another important area where these two seemingly opposing perspectives share a common ground in regards to wisdom. In both the article and the story of the Buddha, we find reference to people who were considered to have significant amounts of wisdom—wisdom of one definition or another. The article alludes to the knowledge and perspectives of most twentieth century researchers in regards to what "makes us wise" and "sets us apart from other animals." The Buddha sought out, and studied with, two of the best spiritual teachers he could find in his multi-year quest to find truth, and to understand and alleviate suffering. In the quest to develop personal wisdom then, it would seem that we need to be seekers, and not just in one particular area, but across a broad range. For several centuries, religion and science were perceived to be at odds with one another. Today, religion and science are finding that wisdom exists in both and that even greater wisdom can be discovered when respect is held for both. I believe this is what Albert Einstein was conveying when he stated, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."

In order for us to be able to develop personal wisdom then, we need to be willing and able to ask questions. And we need to consider the answers we get. We need to consider the answers not just in relation to the specific or narrow topic the answer seems to address, but in relation to the biggest questions we can imagine. Questions such as what is the purpose of life—not just my life but life in general. Taking it even further, we might ask, What is life. I believe that it is in big picture questions such as these that some of the best opportunities to develop personal wisdom may be found. It seems to me that the last two sentences of our reading speak directly to what I am getting at here. Let me share those two lines again. "We learn not by storing static records but by continually retouching memories and imagining future possibilities. Our brain sees the world not by processing every pixel in a scene but by focusing on the unexpected." It is in asking questions that we seek answers to the unknown, at least what is unknown to us, and sometimes we find the unexpected.

It is in asking questions, especially big questions like the ones I mentioned earlier, that our ability to perceive and comprehend the bigger picture expands, often exponentially. It is in this larger framework that I would assert we are most likely and best able to develop personal wisdom that meets the second definition I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. And I am grateful that our religious faith tradition invites all of us,

and encourages each of us, to look not just to religion or science for wisdom, but to seek what both have to offer us. Which brings me to the wisdom contained in our Fourth Principle. This Principle encourages us all to engage in “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

What is needed for us to engage in that free and responsible search for truth and meaning in our quest for wisdom? It seems to me several things are essential. We need to have a healthy and hearty curiosity. We need courage—the courage to question what is accepted as fact, not with animosity but with deep interest in what might lie beyond the fact as it is known. We need compassion—compassion for ourselves and for those we engage with. It is likely that at any given time or in any situation, wisdom may be less prevalent than we would want or expect. We need commitment. As the story of the Buddha’s life indicates, attaining wisdom requires more than a passing interest. Likewise seeking to develop personal wisdom is not something that works well with only a casual and infrequent approach. And, unless we are one of an extremely small few, such as the Buddha, we will need others to support us and assist us on the path.

So as we go our ways today may we seek to approach every day and each situation with a type of curiosity, a level of courage and a capacity for compassion which is required to experience and discover the wisdom that each situation holds and needs. And may we also bring to each new day the commitment required both to develop our own wisdom and to assist others in discovering and advancing their’s as well. If life has taught me anything, it is that there is more for all of us to learn and discover on the path to greater wisdom. In closing, I want to thank you all for being a part of my path and for allowing me to share these thoughts on wisdom.

Blessed be