

## Ways to Wisdom

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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As I listen to and read the news of late, it is clear that humanity is in the midst of at least two significant crises. The two I am referring to are global climate change and the spread of the disease that has been named COVID-19. Together, these two issues threaten the health, wellbeing and possibly even the existence of humans. Appropriately and adequately addressing these two crises will require all of the wisdom we can muster.

As I mentioned during my sermon two weeks ago, wisdom has more than one definition. So what do I mean when I say that we will need wisdom to address these two crises? One definition involves “scholarly knowledge or learning.” Clearly we will need the scholarly knowledge and learning of those who have spent immense amounts of time studying and working in fields relevant to these issues. It seems to me, however, that appropriately and adequately addressing both of these issues will require more than this. I say that because experts in the area of global climate change have been telling us for decades that human behavior has been impacting our atmosphere in ways that change the earth’s climate. Had we listened to and followed the wisdom these experts have been offering, we quite likely wouldn’t be in the situation we are in today.

Along with scholarly knowledge and learning, it seems to me that we will need a broader type of wisdom. We will need a type of wisdom that involves more than just experts in specific fields. We need a type of wisdom that includes as many people as possible. The type of wisdom I am referring to is found in a second definition of the word. That definition refers to the “power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on knowledge, experience, understanding, etc.” Addressing the two critical issues that humanity is currently facing will require that masses of people develop and exhibit the kind of wisdom this definition refers to. If we are going to address these two crises massive numbers of people will need to find ways to judge rightly and follow the soundest course of action.

Of course one path to such wisdom is through seeking out scholarly knowledge or learning ourselves. But that isn’t the only way to such wisdom. There are other paths and approaches we might consider. With the short time I have for this morning’s sermon, I would like to offer three possible ways to wisdom as options for us to think about.

One of the three possible ways to wisdom involves what is sometimes referred to as mysticism. Some people might consider this path to be the opposite of what the first definition of wisdom I mentioned earlier identifies, namely knowledge. Mysticism is found in many of the world’s religious traditions. An ancient philosophical and religious tradition known as Taoism includes significant elements of mysticism. Taoism seeks to assist people in finding and following the wisdom path in life. One meaning of the word Tao is “the way.” You may be familiar with the symbol that is associated with Taoism. It is a circle that has a curved, “S” shaped line that divides it. One side of the circle is white and the other is black. In the white portion there is a small black dot. In the black

portion there is a small white dot. This symbol is sometimes called the Yin Yang symbol. It might seem that the two portions of the inner circle are opposites. In Taoism, however, the symbol is intended to indicate that each side flows out of and into the other. Both are equally important and balanced in the whole of the image. The symbol isn't meant to infer either/or duality. Instead it invites and/or perspectives. Here is what Lao Tsu, who is considered to be the author of the Tao Te Ching, says about knowledge and wisdom. "To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day."

Another possible way wisdom is found in traditions of certain Native American tribes of the plains. For the Cheyenne and the Sioux one pathway to wisdom has been to take on the role of a Heyoehkah. The movie "Little Big Man," starring Dustin Hoffman, has several scenes that show what being a Heyoehkah might involve. I recall one scene where the Heyoehkah rides into camp on his horse. The rider is facing the horse's tail. The rider is wearing a full buffalo robe even though it is mid-summer. The greeting he gives to the first person he addresses is "goodbye." At this point you are probably beginning to notice that everything this person is doing seems to be the opposite of what would normally be expected. To be a Heyoehkah is to take on the role of the contrarian and to do so intentionally. The intentionality of taking on this role is a very important aspect of this pathway to wisdom. A person who would take on this role would make a commitment to do things in a contrary manner for a certain period of time. In doing so, the person would have to think about everything they did and act in a manner that would be beyond the expected norms. Being a Heyoehkah offered both that person and all the members of the tribe opportunities to examine their preconceived and often unconscious ideas of how things ought to be. Someone who took on this roll continually challenged assumptions.

Today, both of the crises I mentioned previously seem to be doing just what the roll of the Heyoehkah was meant to do. Both are challenging our assumptions. There are people today who have been intentionally taking on this contrarian roll and, in doing so, making us look at what we have assumed and taken for granted. For example, I think of Greta Thunberg. For those of you who aren't familiar with Greta, let me offer just a bit of information about her. She is a 17 year-old Swedish woman who has been speaking out about and challenging the use of fossil fuels. She is challenging the adults in the world, and especially the leaders of the world, to change our ways. At 15 she walked out of school to protest, in front of the Swedish parliament, the environmental degradation that is being caused by our use of fossil fuels. In 2019 she traveled to America, via sailboat, to attend and speak at the United Nations Climate Action summit. The roll of the contrarian can be a pathway to wisdom, both for the individual who takes on the roll as well as those who are willing and able to look at and change the assumptions they live by.

The third pathway I want us to consider today involves what is commonly referred to as the arts. The arts include, but are not limited to, such things as painting, sculpture, dance, acting, and music. Those of you who have studied or worked in the arts probably have a much better idea about the variety of ways one can gain wisdom along this pathway. When I first thought of including the arts as a pathway to wisdom, I

will admit that I found myself challenged to come up with examples that would convey what I wanted to communicate to you this morning. As chance would have it, a recent news article opened the window of my imagination and my memories. In the short amount of time I have left I want to focus on one of the arts, namely music. And I want to share three stories of how music can demonstrate and be a way to wisdom.

Story one. Several years ago I saw a Canadian folk singer perform and he told the background of one of his songs. It was a beautiful song about rivers and trees and hills and valleys. He had been singing the song for years before he came to understand that the words of the song were much more than just beautiful lyrics. As he began exploring the song's origins, he discovered that the song was very old, possibly centuries old. The song came from the indigenous people of the area. The words of the song weren't just beautiful lyrics, the words were a map of the area of Canada he grew up in. Once he came to recognize that what he was singing was a map, he could picture specific places he had been. He realized the wisdom of the native people as he imagined them singing the song as they would travel over great distances.

Story two. Those of you who are old enough to recall the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's are well aware that songs were an integral part of the movement. Songs such as "We Shall Overcome" were sung again and again. This song in particular inspired hope and purpose in those who were marching and protesting. This song communicated to those who had been oppressed their entire lives the destination this path was headed toward. And it also communicated to their oppressors that there would come a day when the way things had been would come to an end. I would like to say that day has come, but I must be honest. Some things have changed for the better but the day the song speaks of has not yet arrived. There is still a great deal of wisdom in this song even though the day it tells of is still not here.

Story three is the one I mentioned that I saw in a news article. As you may have heard, Italy is one of the countries that has been hit hard by the COVID-19 virus. In an attempt to slow the spread of the disease, entire communities in parts of Italy have been quarantined. The news article I read stated that at least some of the people in these communities have begun singing on their balconies and out their windows. They have turned to song as a way to boost morale. In such a situation it seems like singing fits well with the second definition of wisdom. Singing would seem to be "the right course of action" for the situation these people find themselves in.

As I stated at the beginning of this sermon, the situation we find ourselves in will require all the wisdom we can muster. My hope is that what I have shared today will expand the ways we will consider as we strive to find the wisdom we will need. None of us knows for certain what the future will hold. It is my hope that in the days and weeks ahead we will follow the wisdom of Lao Tzu as we continue to attain more knowledge by adding things every day and that we will seek to attain more wisdom by removing things everyday. And as we go into an uncertain future, may we learn and sing songs that give us hope and offer us a map to where we hope the path will take us. The choir sang such a song two weeks ago. The song is in our paperback hymnal and it is titled, "Woyaya." It seems appropriate to end with a few lines of that hymn.

We are going, heaven knows where we are going, but we know within. And we  
will get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will. It  
will be hard, we know, and the road will be muddy and rough, but  
we'll get there, heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will.

So may it be.