

## Preparation for Wisdom (Theme for March)

What is wisdom? Most definitions mention knowledge, experience, and good judgment. Wisdom is related to knowledge, but it's not "book learning" or even practical "how to" knowledge. Knowledge can contribute to wisdom, but wisdom always seems to be based on values and on lived experience.

Wisdom can be simple, or complicated, or both. UU minister Robert Fulghum's *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* reminds us that wisdom can often be distilled into simple precepts: "Share everything. Play fair. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess." Yet wisdom is also complicated. It is more than just "wise sayings" and carries with it both the cultural traditions upon which it is often based and the personal truth of our lives as lived through time.

We develop wisdom by living and by reflecting on our experience. Sometimes wisdom grows during hardships and tumult, and sometimes with calm reflection. UU minister Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland describes the growth of wisdom in reflection as "the process of walking around something again and again, even if that thing is your life, and discovering the essence at its core." That process of reflection can be intellectual, emotional, or intuitive. Sharing our wisdom with others by sharing our values and our stories also can be part of this process.

We can enrich our experiential reflection by studying the many sources of wisdom. The UU "Six Sources" suggests the richness available to us: direct experience of mystery, words and deeds of prophetic people, wisdom from the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teachings about love, humanist teachings emphasizing reason and science, and spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions. The list's variety suggests expansion to other wisdom sources: art, travel, listening to each other's stories, being with children and with animals, and many more, personal to each individual.

Many of us have meaningful memories of wise advice we received from parents, mentors, or friends – whether or not we actually followed the advice at the time. Sharing wisdom with others can be difficult, because communicating not just the "wise saying" but the lived truth of the underlying experience is challenging. Wisdom thus must go hand-in-hand with humility and what Krista Tippet calls a "lightness of step." If we share wisdom by sharing our stories, and if we remember that each person's experience has value, our natural desire to impart our hard-earned wisdom may work a little better. Or not.

Wisdom cannot be confined to a specialized field, nor is it an academic discipline; it is the consciousness of wholeness and integrity that transcends both. Wisdom is complexity understood and relationships accepted. *Joseph Meeker*

The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom. *Isaac Asimov*

Sometimes, if you stand on the bottom rail of a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known. *A.A. Milne*

Everyone's story matters. The wisdom in the story of the most educated and powerful person is often not greater than the wisdom in the story of a child, and the life of a child can teach us as much as the life of a sage ... Hidden in all stories is the One story. *Rachel Remen*

Listen: a wisdom within you calls to a wisdom beyond you and in that dialogue lies peace.  
*Rev. Leslie Takahashi*

Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. *Pema Chödrön*

The fear of God is not the beginning of wisdom. The fear of God is the death of wisdom. Skepticism and doubt lead to study and investigation, and investigation is the beginning of wisdom.  
*Clarence Darrow*

Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart,  
until, in our own despair,  
against our will,  
comes wisdom  
through the awful grace of God.  
*Aeschylus*

There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm. *Willa Cather*

Wisdom cannot be imparted. Wisdom that a wise person attempts to impart always sounds like foolishness to someone else. 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*

## Questions to Ponder

1. What is your understanding of wisdom? For you, how is wisdom personal or cultural or universal?
2. Some wisdom is based on knowledge. Some is emotional or social or based on intuition. Some wisdom is practical. Some is spiritual. Wisdom can be gained by calm introspection, listening to wise ones, and surviving life's storms. Which aspects of wisdom resonate most with you?
3. For you, what have been the most important sources of wisdom in addition to your own experience? What sources have recently been most meaningful for you?
4. Who has given you advice that really influenced you? What was the advice? How has following it changed you?
5. What was the wisest decision you have made in your life? What difference has it made for you?
6. Reflect on an experience where you wanted to pass on some of your wisdom to another person. How did you go about it? How did it work out?
7. Consider the Spiritual Exercise in the Wisdom issue of Soul Matters, "The Best Advice You've Received." If you find this spiritual exercise valuable, what was that experience like for you?

## Words of the Day

Imagine that you are giving a commencement speech, wise advice for new graduates. In a word or phrase, what would your theme be? For the Gathering, we will complete the sentence "My theme for a commencement speech would be ..."

Some questions, quotes, and ideas are adapted from the Soul Matters March 2020 "Wisdom" issue. Also see that issue for the Spiritual Exercise and additional resources.