

When is Wisdom?

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

A toddler who edges a finger to the business end of a candle is the wiser for it. But the man who learned in infancy the consequences of fire and yet puts a burning cigarette in his mouth is not wise. It is a folly that proves wisdom is not the sum of experience or age, or even a combination of the two.

The dictionaries generally define wisdom as the ability to discern inner qualities and relationships, to have experience, knowledge, insight, good sense and judgment. I believe, to be wise, a person needs every one of those qualities, because experience and knowledge are the foundation of insight, good sense and judgment. And of those two, experience is the fundament of knowledge.

Ben Franklin expressed what was perhaps a simplistic view of acquiring wisdom when he said, "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." Will Rogers saw the process as something deeper, that becoming wise is rooted in living life when he said, "Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment."

As I contemplate an essay on the topic of wisdom, I am gaining only in the wisdom that trying to find wisdom by googling it as a fool's mission. But perhaps I still am wiser for having tried, for, as the British statesman Benjamin Disraeli once wrote, "The fool wonders, the wise man asks."

Other wise men recognize that knowledge alone is not a fountain of wisdom. Jimi Hendrix, that rock star of the twentieth century, is credited with saying, "Knowledge speaks, wisdom listens." And Lao Tzu wrote, "To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day."

Wisdom is a soulful thing. In the words of the Lebanese-American writer, Kahlil Gibran, "Wisdom ceases to be wisdom when it becomes too proud to weep, too grave to laugh, and too selfish to seek other than itself." And in another quotation, he adds, "Keep me away from the wisdom which does not cry, the philosophy which does not laugh and the greatness which does not bow before children."

Similarly, the Quaker theologian David Elton Trueblood recognized the soulfulness of wisdom in saying, "A man has made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he will never sit."

Shakespeare didn't think highly of self-promoting wise men, writing "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool." The bard probably got that one from reading Socrates, "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."

And now I come to another ancient Greek, the mathematician Pythagoras, who, like any good person of numbers, has told me it is time to shut up. "Talk is not the foundation of wisdom, either," he said, "A fool is known by his speech; and a wise man by silence."