

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**“Becoming Wise”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore April 25, 2021

## Opening Words

Wisdom is a human capacity that has high value. It is worthy of a lifelong pursuit to become wise. Our service this morning will point us in the direction of wisdom, but, as will become clear, it is a quality of consciousness that isn't easy to convey or teach.

What is easy to fill our heads with ... is knowledge. Today there is so much to know it can be overwhelming. Computer databases fill up with information that then is organized and interpreted to yield knowledge. And vast amounts of knowledge is available at our fingertips through search engines. There is more to know than anyone can possibly comprehend.

Understanding is the next step up from knowledge. Significance is extracted from the knowledge to recognize patterns, trends and meanings. Yet one can understand a lot and may not be able to use and apply that understanding effectively.

That is where wisdom comes in. Wisdom integrates understanding with experience and insight to discern the wholesome, beneficial, and good use of that understanding.

A couple of simple illustrations:

“Knowledge is knowing what to say. Wisdom is knowing when to say it.”

“Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not to put it in the fruit salad.”

Let us investigate today how we can curate our knowledge and understanding into wisdom.

## Reading

I'd like to start with some answers on how to become wise. This might be all you'll need to hear this morning. If you are not wise right now, Dr. Carol Morgan has [10 ways to Think Like A Wise Person](#) (adapted & edited):

1. Think before you speak.  
One of the principles of communication is that “Once you say it, you can't take it back.”
2. Realize there is never a ‘right time.’  
There is no time like the present. So, the best time to do *something*, **anything** is now.
3. Balance self-interest with the collective good.  
You should care about your own needs. But you should also care about other people's needs too. It's a balancing act that can be achieved if you attend to it.
4. Put things in perspective before you jump to conclusions.  
Take some time to calm down, put everything into perspective, and then review the facts not assumptions.

5. Don't blindly accept the status quo.  
Just because everyone does something doesn't mean you have to join in.
6. Keep your power – don't let other people's negativity upset you.  
Wise people realize that they can control their actions in response to their thoughts and feelings.
7. Don't act impulsively – have a purpose and a goal.  
Acting on impulse can lead to regrets. If you don't take the time to think things through, you might create problems.
8. Accept other people for who they are.  
Let's face it, most people try to change others. Why do we do that? It's really pointless.
9. The cover may be pretty, but the book might not be.  
The "outer person" may not be the same as the "inner person." Wise people don't get deceived by charm, personality, or looks.
10. Don't judge others – try to understand them instead.  
Above all else, truly wise people don't judge. They practice empathy.

## Spoken Meditation

I invite you to contemplate these words of the Buddha on right view, which I will interpret here as wisdom, that is the beginning of the eightfold path:

Just as when a neem-tree seed, a bitter creeper seed, or a bitter melon seed is placed in moist soil, whatever nutriment it takes from the soil & the water, all conduces to its bitterness, acidity, & distastefulness. Why is that? Because of the reactive and defensive nature of the seed...

Just as when a sugar cane seed, a rice grain, or a grape seed is placed in moist soil, whatever nutriment it takes from the soil & the water, all conduces to its sweetness, tastiness, & unalloyed delectability. Why is that? Because of the auspicious and generous nature of the seed.

In the same way, when people have wisdom, whatever bodily deeds they undertake in line with that view, whatever verbal deeds... whatever mental deeds they undertake in line with that view, whatever intentions, whatever vows, whatever determinations, whatever fabrications, all lead to what is agreeable, pleasing, charming, productive, & easeful. Why is that? Because of the auspicious and generous nature of the wisdom.

## Sermon

Monday morning, eating my eggs and hash browns and drinking my freshly brewed tea, I noticed David Brooks column in the Times Union on wisdom. He made the distinction between wisdom and knowledge that I made in my opening words. I read on *with concern* that he might scoop my sermon. I appreciated his reference to one of my favorite podcasts called "Everything Happens" by Kate Bowler, a Duke professor of religion. She is full of wisdom earned through surviving (so far) stage IV cancer at 35. Interesting and insightful as Brooks' essay was, with relief, I recognized he didn't steal my topic, how we become wise.

I will borrow a good quote from Brooks however, “Montaigne pointed out: you can be knowledgeable with another person’s knowledge **but you can’t be wise** with another person’s wisdom.” Wisdom is the accumulated ability to use the right know-how at the right moment.

The classic example of this is parenting. Most parents-to-be, especially new mothers, will read shelves of books about how to care for their soon to be born baby. While the books can be helpful, there are wise parenting tips that primarily come with experience. Knowing the mapping of this bit of knowledge to this situation, say to comfort a distressed infant, takes some time to develop.

How many of us fail the IKEA challenge of assembling a new piece of furniture because the step-by-step instructions just don’t make sense surveying the pile of parts and connectors on the floor? I replaced our backyard deck’s rotting boards a few years ago. My neighbor, wise in these matters, came over to offer unsolicited advice as I was laying the replacement boards out. He showed me the curve of each board. He recommended I lay the board concave side down so rain wouldn’t pool on it and accelerate its deterioration.

Wisdom is critically important for marginalized people encountering officially disseminated knowledge. A drivers education manual may describe what to do if one is stopped by a police officer, for example. A Black teenager’s life may depend on knowing they may be treated as guilty till proven innocent during a traffic stop. Reaching for their wallet or the glove box or confrontational language might get them killed due to unconscious (or conscious for that matter) bias operating in the police officer. Men may not appreciate the precautions and care women take walking alone at night, if they are even willing to do it at all, due to the risks they might encounter. Whatever gender or color, all of us want to be wise when we interview for a job to maximize the chances of landing employment.

I doubt I’ll get much of a dispute – all of us want wisdom. So how do we become wise?

One of the oldest ways wisdom gets passed down through culture is through proverbs and aphorisms. These are philosophical key phrases that help translate knowledge into action. Here are a few:

- Japanese proverb: Fall seven times, get up eight.
- Maori Proverb: Turn your face toward the sun and the shadows fall behind you.
- Cuban Proverb: Cheese, wine and friends must be old to be good.
- English Proverb: Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.

Quotes are great benchmarks for wisdom. Here are a few:

- Dalai Lama: Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk.
- Emerson: Common sense is genius dressed in its working clothes.
- C. S. Lewis: Nothing that you have not given away will ever really be yours.
- John D. Rockefeller: Singleness of purpose is one of the chief essentials for success in life, no matter what may be one’s aim.
- Aristotle: Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.

Another way to become wise is to live a long time and make a lot of mistakes. A person who is 20 years-old is likely to be wiser in the ways of the world than a 10 year-old. I know I'm much wiser in ministry than I was when I was ordained in 1992. Unfortunately, Time better correlates with accumulating knowledge rather than with wisdom. Not everyone's wisdom grows with age. I suspect we can all think of unfortunate people who seem not to be able to learn from their mistakes and continue to repeat them.

So, there are many ways to grow in wisdom. What I'd like to contribute to your development of wisdom this morning is some Buddhist approaches that have been quite helpful for me in the wisdom development process.

In Buddhist understanding, wisdom and compassion are the two wings that can liberate us from stress and suffering. You need both. Meditation techniques can be helpful for sharpening one's ability to know and recognize what is true in the realm of cause and effect. Mindfulness alerts us to opportunities for wholesome action. Mindfulness doesn't necessarily *direct us* in how to respond. Wisdom and compassion are needed for that.

The source of Buddhist wisdom springs from an accurate perception of reality, free from delusion and self-interest. Buddhism, like scientific understanding, is grounded in cause and effect. All effects have causes. The connection however between cause and effect may not be apparent or easily knowable. Buddhists believe in multiple lifetimes so the effects experienced now might have their origin in causes long, long ago. This is easy to understand if we look at systems and culture. American views of individual autonomy have deep roots in our history that would be foreign to someone from China or Japan. Honor culture is more prevalent in the South than it is in the North of this country. Southern immigration from Scotland where honor culture was more predominant was different from the English influence in the North.

Buddhism, like many Asian traditions, recognizes the cyclical nature of time. Rather than focusing on a temporal direction, goal or ultimate end of history, all there is, is impermanent, endless change. While karma, or past actions, might be inherited by a person today, as both Black and White Americans inherit the legacy of slavery, our identities are also malleable and impermanent. Though there may be strong genetic, nurture based and cultural influences that shape our identity, that identity is not completely fixed, permanent or eternal. This is true for everyone, *even those* we might want to categorize as an enemy. The roots of universal compassion are right here.

This changeable nature of being alive can be quite disturbing as it reveals our impermanence. We are of the nature to get old, to get sick on occasion, and to die. Central to being a living organism is to resist non-being or death. Yet figuring out how to make peace with this unavoidable consequence can open a lot of wisdom about how to live well with the time we have.

The Buddha figured out how to do this and taught it through cultivating the ability to personally witness these truths and observe our mental response in our moment-to-moment experience. He recognized resistance to and rejection of the truth of impermanence generates mal-adaptation to reality that causes great harm to oneself and others. The Buddha named that mal-adaptation, the three poisons of craving, hatred, and delusion. We want what we don't have. We reject what we do have. And we suffer great confusion about how to respond to life's challenges in non-harming ways.

Witnessing directly, in one's personal experience, *both* the helpful and harmful mental responses, becomes a direct path to the cultivation of wisdom.

An example of mindful wisdom accumulation might be helpful here.

I lived in an integrated neighborhood in North Oakland, California on the border with Berkeley called Rockridge in the early 1980's. Comfortable walking at night, I set off down my street to an event at someone's house about ten blocks away. I didn't want to take the car and the night air was refreshingly cool.

As I was walking on the left side of the street, about a block ahead of me, two athletic looking, tall Black teens came up a side street and started walking ahead of me. Then one stopped and knelt to tie his shoe as the other walked ahead a few paces stopped and turned around.

Something didn't feel right about this situation as I approached them, so I got off the sidewalk and walked into the street to pass them. As I did, one of them made a leering comment, "Hey, sport." That made me feel even more uncomfortable. I resumed walking on the sidewalk ahead of them not looking back. My feeling of discomfort continued to increase but I heard my mother's voice in my head saying, "Don't be a racist thinking these teenagers are a threat to you."

Suddenly I was flying forward and landed on the ground. One of them had snuck up behind me and hit me hard on the back of the head. They wanted money but I hadn't brought my wallet so they took my keys that were in a wallet like case and ran. I walked back home in a daze, nursing my head injury. Thankfully, it wasn't too serious an injury ... but I did lose all my smell memories that took years to relearn.

I tell this story because it was an enormous source of wisdom for me. I learned that my feeling-intuition had given me information about a threat that I had ignored because of a flawed approach to being an anti-racist. I didn't want to believe these kids would harm me ... but they did. It would be *completely flawed*, too, for me to treat all Black teens as a threat. What I had ignored was the "threat radar" evolution had given me to sense what my cognitive mind didn't and maybe couldn't. I had wise choices *I didn't* take advantage of. I could have taken a different route and kept an eye on those teens without disrespecting them with suspicion. I later learned, in a self-defense class, that the best way to deal with a threat situation is to avoid it, if possible.

The Pali Buddhist term for wisdom is "paññā." It can also be translated as discernment, insight, intelligence, ingenuity and even common sense. *This* is the quality that Unitarian Universalism adds to our religious approach. Unitarians and Universalists diverged from our Christian siblings over the use of the mind in religion. We had confidence in our ability to know truth through our senses and thought. We don't anoint one prophet, one teacher or revealed source as the repository of absolute truth. We recognize it as available to us through our lived experience ... just as the Buddha did.

I've gravitated to Buddhism because of the sophisticated methods they've developed to discern truth through direct witnessing of moment-to-moment experience. I've witnessed the connection between how I suffer and the patterns of my mental conditioning. I've experienced freedom from suffering as I've let go of some of that conditioning and cultural programming. And I've also experienced a capacity to love that has grown along with that letting go.

I hope this exploration of a Buddhist method of becoming wise is helpful this morning. May whatever method of becoming wise *that works for you* be respected as a potential source of encouragement for spiritual growth. May we all strive for growth and development that supports our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

So be it.