



High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Summit County, Colorado

Celebrating life in community
in the beautiful mountains of Colorado!

June 17, 2018

Monthly Touchstones Theme
Wisdom

Service Leaders: Pat McShane
& Marge Seabourn

Sunday Services, 4:00 pm weekly

Fellowship Hall

Lord of the Mountains

Lutheran Church

56 Highway 6, Dillon, CO 80435

(Services are not held in the
months of October and May)

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If I Had Only Known

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

Too Soon Old

I heard it said by adults when I was a young teenager: "If I had only known then what I know now, I would have done things differently."



My unspoken response was, "But there is no way to know, there is no crystal ball to foretell the future." Underneath the words of the adults was a range of emotions: wistfulness, dread, disbelief, despair, regret, resignation, sorrow, betrayal, anger.... In retrospect, I have wondered if what they meant was this: "If I knew that I was going to grow old, if I knew that every action in life had consequences, if I knew that everything I said yes to made some things possible, but foreclosed a range of other possibilities, I would have lived more deliberately, more passionately, more wisely, ... you fill in the blank. Certainly, we can live our lives with apparent purpose and meaning only to wake up one day and ask, "Is this all there is, Is this all I am?" These existential

moments are quite compelling, a kind of judgment-day that suddenly and unexpectedly arises out of the midst of our life and stops us in our tracks.

These moments are unavoidable, because time is fleeting, because the nature and quality of our lives matter.

Growing up in western Pennsylvania, I often heard the Pennsylvania Dutch proverb: Too soon old, too late smart. For me, it is not primarily a matter of intelligence, as important as that may be. I would offer this alternative: Too soon old, too late wise. In this I am reminded of words written by Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum, probably in the early 1980s, when he was the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Edmonds, Washington. Fulghum noted that the examined life was no picnic, still he pursued the discipline of writing a credo each year in the springtime, a personal statement of belief.

Kindergarten

Fulghum retired from parish ministry in 1985 and has since written 13 books with more than 17 million copies in print, published in 27 languages in 103 countries. His first book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, which stayed on the New York Times best seller list for nearly two years, was written using newsletter columns from his 22 years in ministry.

In that long ago springtime Fulghum wrote:

"All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be, I learned

Our Mission: It is the purpose of the High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship [HCUUF] to be a community filled with love, beauty, and compassion. We are committed to freedom of opinion, expression, and spirituality. We seek to be of service to each other, our families, our larger community, and our natural environment.

in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out in the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup—they all die. So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned—the biggest word of all—LOOK.

Everything you need to know is there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to you family life or your work or your government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think of what a better world it would be if we all—the whole world—had cookies and milk about 3 o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and clean up their own mess.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are—when you go out in the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."

So there you have it, Fulghum's credo grounded in the conviction that, "Wisdom was not at the top of the grad-



uate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at Sunday School." Well, yes and no. What was important in the sand pile at Sunday School for Fulghum when he was five years old was not wisdom, but experience. The wisdom emerged slowly over time as he reflected on those long ago experiences. After all, he had written a credo, a statement of personal belief, each springtime for many years before he wrote this credo about kindergarten in his mid-40s, which quickly made him famous.

Let's do the numbers. By the time Fulghum finished kindergarten, he had five years of experience. He wrote the piece when he was about 45, which yields up to 40 years of reflection on his experience in kindergarten. The result? Wisdom!

Information/Knowledge/ Wisdom

Wisdom, as an ideal, has been celebrated since antiquity. It is thought to be a complex process that integrates information, knowledge, understanding, experience, and, more recently, emotional intelligence. The resulting wisdom is necessary to live a good life.

T.S. Eliot wrote, "where is the life we have lost in living? /where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" Information is necessary, for it presents us with the facts. Information is the "who," "what," "where," and "when" of existence, but it is not enough. We take the facts of existence and apply them to make sense of "how." This is knowledge, which is significant, but not sufficient. We are driven to understand, to make sense of the "why." It is by transforming information into knowledge that we find our

way to understanding. As we do this again and again there is a process of distillation that produces the elixir that we call wisdom. And, in a lifetime, we will have done well to fill a cup half-full with wisdom.

Sand Piles

Wisdom does not lament about the past, although it uses the past by reflecting on experience in order to transform knowledge into meaning. Wisdom looks at the present moment to determine what to decide and do in order to live well in the current sand pile in which we find ourselves. The metaphor of a sandpile is important because it suggests that the materials we have to work with can give expression to our creativity. It also suggests a fluid process grounded in the reality that changes are inevitable since the winds of change will surely rearrange the sand continuously.

Uncommon Sense

When I was growing up my mother would tell me, on a fairly regular basis, that I did not have common sense, although she never defined what she meant by common sense. Generally, it consists of what people in common would agree on: that which they "sense" as their common natural understanding. A definition, however, attributed to Albert Einstein states: "Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen." As I think about the arc of my own life, I have been pursuing uncommon sense, which I regard as wisdom.

Wisdom in Short Supply

As Michael McKinney observes, "Wisdom requires a deeper understanding of the commonplace." Wisdom is neither knowledge nor understanding, yet its cultivation depends upon both. Wisdom is informed by experience and intuition. It is also dependent upon intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity. The value of wisdom has long been recognized culturally and philosophically. One of our Unitarian Universalist sources refers to "wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us

in our ethical and spiritual life." Wisdom is not simply a quality of being, it is practical in the sense that it demands, informs, and guides action. It has been defined as an awareness of the best ends as well as the best means. Society rightly places great value on wisdom, in part, because it is in such short supply.

Integrity vs. Despair

For Confucius, wisdom was acquired by three methods: reflection, which was the noblest; imitation, which was the easiest; and experience, which was the bitterest. Erik Erikson (1902-1994), a Danish-American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, related wisdom to the last stage of his eight-stage theory of psycho-social development. He asserted that from approximately 65 years of age



until death, individuals must resolve a conflict between integrity and despair. For Erikson, the cultivation of wisdom was a primary way of resolving this conflict, although he was not advocating waiting until a person was 65 to begin seeking wisdom. This conflict between integrity and despair is at the root of the lament, "If I had only known then what I know now, I would have done things differently." How do we address the despair inherent in this statement? It requires integrity, the assertion that we have done the best that we could, as well as honesty about where we have failed in our own expectations for life. As playwright Edward Albee noted, "Sometimes we have to go a long distance around in order to come back a short distance correctly." This is one of the ways that we cultivate wisdom, both in the journey and in our reflection on the journey as we try to make sense of it, by which I mean uncommon sense.

Best Means to the Best Ends

Unitarian Universalist minister Galen Guengerich writes, "The purpose of wisdom is two-fold. It shapes the character of our inner lives by addressing

our need for insight and purpose. It also shapes the character of our work in the world by providing us with moral guidance and defining the arc of justice." Wisdom compels us to act in certain ways in the world because we have become aware of the best means to the best ends.

Finding Wisdom in Between

Wisdom is elusive. In an essay entitled "Wisdom: The Pauses between the Notes," Michael McKinney writes, "Austrian-American concert pianist Artur Schnabel was once asked how he was able to handle musical notes so beautifully. His answer can teach us an essential element of wisdom: 'The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses between the notes—ah, that is where the art resides.' To gain wisdom we must look at the spaces between events. Only then does a meaningful, complete picture emerge. Wisdom is a quality of mind, a way of looking at life. It is to see life both horizontally and vertically. It is equally to see the holes between the threads in the fabric of life. As we look deeper we see that all life is connected to everything else. That, in turn, causes us to take in more, to see more widely. Wisdom requires that we arrange what we observe and know, and create meaning from it. It embodies the kind of integrative thinking that can successfully guide and direct our lives."

This idea of the spaces between the notes, also applies to poetry, to the spaces between the words, to what is said and what is unsaid, either by intention or accident. In music and poetry, we have the task of seeking the "more" and this takes us toward wisdom. The same is true of our lives as we see the spaces between events, the spaces between our lives and the lives of others, and take up the task of considering meaningful connections that make sense. And often it is in the uncommon connections that are

not obvious that wisdom emerges.

A Bird in the Hand

Herman Hesse said, "Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom." A story from the Hassidic tradition, with



which I will end, illustrates this. As the story goes,

A young man had just completed his spiritual training. He was eagerly intent on becoming a teacher

as he moved to a new town. He tried to teach but no one came. The only spiritual interest in town was the many followers of a wise and well-known rabbi. Frustrated, the student devised a plan to embarrass the old rabbi and gain students for himself. He captured a small bird and one day went to where the master was seated surrounded by many disciples.

Keeping the small bird hidden in his hand he spoke directly to the rabbi.

"If you are so wise, tell me now is this bird in my hand alive or is it dead?" His plan was this: If the rabbi said the bird was dead, he would open his hand, the bird would fly away, the rabbi would be wrong, and the students would come to him. If, however, the rabbi said the bird was alive, he would quickly crush the bird in his hand and open it and say, "See, the bird is dead." Again the rabbi would be wrong and the young teacher would gain students.

He sat poised in front of the rabbi demanding an answer. "Tell, me, if you are so wise, is this bird alive or is it dead?"

The rabbi looked at him with great compassion and said simply, "The answer, my friend, is in your hands, not mine."

The acquisition of wisdom necessary to live your life well is in your hands. May the wisdom that you acquire allow you to live a life of integrity and authenticity, one that makes a difference in you and for others.

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