

Much Madness is Divinest Sense: Wisdom and Development

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Abstract: No one has yet come up with a complete understanding of wisdom. We can approximate it, we can circle it, we can gaze at it longingly, we can try to seize it with both hands. In my attempt to understand wisdom, I look at it through several different lenses – recent research into measures of wisdom, the discoveries of neuroscience, integral theory, post-conventional development, how wisdom operates in daily life, and my own findings. They include my four-part model and my assertion that wisdom lies on a continuum from rare and rarefied to humble and pragmatic. Finally, I discuss how individuals can enhance their own wisdom and encourage it in others. Wisdom is large; it contains multitudes.

Keywords: Adult development, brain research, knowledge, practical, useful, wisdom, wise.

Life by Emily Dickinson

MUCH madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye;
Much sense the starkest madness.
'Tis the majority
In this, as all, prevails.
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur, – you 're straightway dangerous,
And handled with a chain.

Emily Dickinson tells us a lot about wisdom in this short poem, although it is entitled *Life*. To those with a discerning eye, those who can see more deeply into the mystery of things and into the patterns that lie therein, those people see something that makes sense where others behold only randomness and chaos. However, in most cases in our world, the view of the majority prevails, and those with discerning eyes can be considered not to be trusted – not promoted, not voted for, not accepted in the conventional world.

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How often have we seen those with keener sight shunned by society, if not killed? I am thinking, of course, of Jesus and Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. But not all. Some are accorded the greatest respect, such as the Buddha who lived to a ripe old age. Eleanor Roosevelt with her compassion and action for the disadvantaged died in her later years, and Nelson Mandela lived into his 90's. The Nobel Peace Prize winner of 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, continues her work to lead her country towards democracy.

I give examples above of those we perceive as model and exceptional human beings. Yet in my view, wisdom is not limited to people like them. Wisdom is a real thing for real people, people like you and me, although the scope and impact of our wisdom likely will not be as broad and deep as theirs.

Some years ago I began to wonder about wisdom, what it is, and how we can know it. How can we understand wisdom? But then, after reflection, I realized that understanding wisdom requires a broad brush approach – one cannot know it by one method only. Hence, I changed the question to this: “How can we see wisdom?” deliberately using the verb “to see” as more inclusive than understanding, which is a primarily cognitive activity. In order to see wisdom in its complexity and subtlety, we need a more comprehensive approach.

Hence, I devised a taxonomy of three basic approaches to seeing wisdom (Bassett, 2006, p. 283). They include what I called then the *metaphysical* side (non-empirical reality) that comprises philosophy and theology/religious studies. On the *word arts* side we have myths and folk sayings, the literary arts, and biography. Finally, on the *analytical* side, we find conceptual/theoretical/descriptive approaches as well as empirical ones (though the two are related), which include practical knowledge/expertise, developmental, and personal attributes of wisdom. Thus, we can find wisdom in philosophy and religion; in myths, novels, poetry, other arts; and we can try to understand it more directly using analytical techniques.

Since that publication, however, I have re-conceptualized the taxonomy and changed it in a major way – into a spectrum where we see wisdom but with different colors, so to speak. On one end (the ultraviolet, to continue with the metaphor) we have descriptions of wisdom or words about it, such as philosophy, myth, and inspiration from the religions of the world. We would also find biographies of people considered wise, as well as the analytical approach, that is, conceptual, theoretical, or research-based studies of wisdom. At the other end, the infrared, we find direct experience of wisdom through, for example, the arts. I am thinking of Emily Dickinson's poem above and much of the wisdom (and folly) that we find in great literature. This direct apperception is not limited, however, to the literary arts. Wisdom can be found in music, in the visual arts (take a look at Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* where Sophia, the original goddess of wisdom, appears under God's left arm – she is the closest being to him), and other media, as well as in observing wisdom in the actions of people near or far. One source of finding such people would be in the lives of some Nobel Peace Prize winners and other historical figures for whom there is some consensus of wisdom. I believe that we should notice and pay attention to specific people to see how they actually manifest wisdom. Few researchers do this.

Thus, how we see wisdom depends upon which wave lengths our eyes pick up and what we are attuned to – is it religious texts, research studies, Shakespeare, or actual people who seem

wise? Different people will see different parts of the spectrum while other parts of it will remain opaque or invisible to them.

In this article, I will be focusing on the analytical approach, although the quote above by Emily Dickinson captures what wisdom looks like better than any definition I know. It gives us the flavor of it, the taste of it, the zing of it, what we experience when we encounter wisdom – and also the threat of it to the status quo (think of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr.). We should not forget this aspect of wisdom.

To be able to focus better, we will look at wisdom through several different lenses. I begin with the lens of definitions of wisdom and the Emergent Wisdom Model which expands upon my definition. Next we look at some ways of measuring wisdom and the findings of neuroscience and the brain, then move on to integral theory and post-conventional development. We will also explore everyday wisdom as well as wisdom seen through my own lens, that is, what I have learned about it in my years of studying it.

Wisdom through the Lens of Some Definitions of Wisdom and a Model of Wisdom

Wisdom, such a complex, abstract, and elusive construct! So many definitions for it, so many more ideas about it, so many associations with it – aphorisms, sayings, words/concepts that seem to exemplify wisdom. They sound good, so they must be true. Here are some:

“The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.”
Socrates, *Apology*

“Zi Gong [a disciple] asked: ‘Is there any one word that could guide a person throughout life?’ The Master replied: ‘How about “reciprocity”!’ Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself.”
Confucius, *Analects* XV.24, tr. David Hinton

“Winners never quit and quitters never win.”
Vince Lombardi (Lombardi, 2002)

“Awe of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”
Proverbs, 1:7

But let’s turn to scholars who study wisdom and who try to capture its allure and power in a sentence or two. Founded by the late Paul Baltes, the Berlin School, as it is known, is an organization with a well-known and robust research agenda for wisdom. These researchers use this definition, orienting towards wisdom as expert knowledge: “expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life permitting exceptional insight, judgment, and advice involving complex and uncertain matters of the human condition” (Baltes & Staudinger, 1993, p. 76). (What I find missing in this definition is reference to what most consider a key aspect of wisdom which is mention of the common good, that is, good results not only for self but also for others).

Robert Sternberg's complicated definition is quite inclusive: "Wisdom is defined as the application of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a *balance* among (a) intrapersonal, b) interpersonal, and (c) extrapersonal interests, over the (a) short- and (b) long-terms, in order to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation to existing environments, (b) shaping of existing environments, and (c) selection of new environments" (2007, p. 145). Thus, here we find wisdom as the application, the use of, not only intelligence and knowledge but also creativity to find a balance among these many elements: inside oneself (the intrapersonal), with others (interpersonal: people one knows, community, workplace), and in society at large including institutions, country, God (extrapersonal). It is important to note that, as he says, they are *mediated by values*, that is, by what is considered important and ethical. And, wisdom looks at both the short-term and the long-term so that a person can adapt if that is the best route to take and/or change the existing environment and/or choose a different environment if the existing one does not work/will not change. And it is all to move towards a common good.

A third major wisdom researcher, Monika Ardelt, has contributed her three-dimensional wisdom scale built from her definition of wisdom. (In the section on measures of wisdom I will discuss her three dimensional wisdom scale). For now, we can say that her definition includes three elements: the cognitive, the affective, and the reflective (Ardelt, 2003). Of these, the last, the reflective, is the most fundamental component as it informs the others because it encourages cognitive development through the ability to take multiple perspectives – to see things from different points of view. Further, through reflection, wiser people have learned how not to be so reactive in unpleasant situations, to accept the reality of the present moment, and to cope better (Ardelt, 2003). (Like the Berlin School's definition, this one lacks reference to a common good).

Walsh (2011) takes a different perspective, examining contemplative, cross-cultural, and integral contributions to concepts of wisdom. He distinguished between practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and *sophia*, where the former represents applied wisdom and the latter subjective or intuitive. In fact, he goes on to differentiate among different kinds of subjective wisdom, what he calls intuitive apprehension and conceptual understanding. The former is the kind of wisdom that can be gained intuitively, through observation of life, by people educated or not, intellectually developed or not. The latter, however, conceptual analysis, can enrich intuitions, he says, "by examining, extending, and articulating them, drawing out implications, and linking them into networks of insights and ideas" (Walsh, 2011, p. 123).

Yet, what *is* wisdom, according to Walsh? His definition of practical wisdom goes far: "practical wisdom is a function of skill in responding to the central existential issues of life in ways that enhance the deep well-being of all those that the responses affect" (Walsh, 2011, p. 122). According to his schema, what would a person with the conceptual understanding look like? How would her behavior differ from mine or anyone else's? Walsh could enhance his good work by selecting some specific individuals who have these qualities and describing how they manifest them.

Walsh's (2011) definition of practical wisdom resembles in many ways my own which reads like this: "Wisdom is having sufficient awareness in various situations and contexts to act in ways that enhance our common humanity" (Bassett, 2011a, p. 305). As I noted above, a person

cannot be considered wise unless he or she shows repeated instances of the kind of behavior that is associated with wisdom, over time and in different kinds of circumstances. Wisdom is not a one-shot deal; once is a lucky accident. This is the first key component of the definition.

The second key component is reference to enhancing our common humanity or striving for good results not only for ourselves but for many others as well. By the phrase “common good” or “common humanity” I mean general conditions that are to everyone’s advantage. Granted, this “everyone” might not be every single person but it does suggest, I believe, that someone, Person A, for example, would prefer not to be in the place of someone else, Person B. What does this signify? Let’s take a look at slavery in the United States. Abolition would be better for the slaves but not for the slave-owners. However, I can bet everything I own that not one of them would willingly change places from owner to slave. The “general conditions” to everyone’s advantage are those that almost every single person would prefer.

However, it is the third component that is by far the most powerful and important – the two words “sufficient awareness.” “Sufficient awareness” means paying attention to what’s going on around oneself. It means seeing the environment and then seeing it again from several perspectives. Sufficient awareness is what leads us into the complexity of wisdom with various elements that each interact with any and all of the others. This is best shown by the Emergent Wisdom Model (Bassett, 2006, p. 295; Bassett, 2011a, p. 305) and reproduced below. In fact, the whole model *is* what sufficient awareness looks like – all of these elements working in concert with each other.

The model is based upon a grounded theory study that I did where I interviewed 24 individuals judged thoughtful and insightful in a modified snowball method. I call it “emergent” because, while the model cannot show it, the elements are in motion. They shift and change in relationship to each other with differing elements becoming more prominent at times, then fading into the background.

Interestingly, we can also see this model like a fractal: a scale-independent self-similarity. That is, no matter how large or how small the situation being contemplated is, the elements of wisdom will be present.

What is wisdom? All of this is wisdom, all of it combined and together. Each element is necessary but not sufficient. Each of the cells relates to, interacts with, influences, and is influenced by any and all of the others. Wisdom is both non-linear *and* dynamic. Thus, we can take any single cell and it will relate to any and all of the others. Just because Insight, for example, is listed in the first column does not mean that it has to do only with Discernment. It is also necessary for action and for self-knowledge. Embracing paradox relates to the Integration dimension, and it also is necessary to gain a deep understanding of patterns and to take multiple perspectives on a situation. At the same time, it is important to remember that this is just a model, that is, one person’s understanding of wisdom. Because wisdom is so complex, in reality there is certainly some messiness here, with categories overlapping and sliding around a bit.

Table 1. Emergent Wisdom Model © 2005 Caroline Bassett

WISDOM				
Dimension	Discernment	Respect	Engagement	Integration
Chief Descriptor	Objectivity	Due regard for the right of others to be	Involvement	Recognition of the integration of self into the whole Knowing that the self is part of many systems
Proficiency	Insight Holistic thinking, systemic seeing into complexity Balanced interests	Acceptance Multiple perspective-taking Compassion & caring/ Generosity of spirit/ non-judgmental	Sound judgment & adept decision-making Actions based on determinations of fairness & justice Moral courage	Self-knowledge Self-acceptance Reflection – opening to cognitive and non-cognitive mental spaces
Manifestation	Deep understanding of fundamental patterns and relationships, causes, and consequences	Sense of gratitude/ Expanded sphere of consideration	Committed action for the common good (general conditions that are to everyone's advantage)	Embracing of paradox & uncertainty Ability to see beyond the self Growing recognition of interdependence Integrity
Developmental Stimulus/ Queries	What's really going on? What are the facts? What's true? What's important? What's right?	Whose point of view am I taking? How does someone else understand reality? How can I relate to them with magnanimity?	What guides my actions? To what ends are my actions directed? What means do I use? What are the consequences of different decisions?	What are my values? How do I live them? Who or what is the "I" that I think I am? What am I part of? How can I get outside of myself so I can see more clearly?
WISDOM				

While I present my model as a chart, as stated previously, wisdom really is non-linear and three-dimensional. That is, each and every cell relates to any and all of the others. So, for example, holistic thinking and systems seeing into complexity in the first column informs and is informed by compassion and caring in the second. I can see a system more completely if I include not just the objective facts but also the emotions that are present in a situation. I can make sounder judgments (in column three) if I see things more in the round, more completely. And if I know that everything is related to everything else (the recognition of interdependence in column four), then my seeing will be even more complex – and hopefully more comprehensive –

leading to better decisions for action (if deemed necessary), which is what wisdom is about. Thus, a better way of regarding the model as shown in the table is as a spiral. Increasing integration, that is, recognition that the self is part of a much larger whole (a background-foreground shift of the ego with regards the rest of the world) allows for sharper discernment because one can see more clearly as there is less ego and fewer projections in the way. That in turn allows for a broadening of what one considers worth paying attention to. And then that creates a basis for appropriate engagement.

The model as shown in Figure 1 shows that wisdom is all of a whole, is one thing – but with different dimensions that we distinguish for the sake of understanding it better. This conceptualization shows the dynamic quality of wisdom, its continuous flow with each part connecting to the others. However, I do not speak quite accurately here, because wisdom does not have discrete parts that are separate and distinct from each other. When we talk about it and draw models of it, it looks as if it does. Instead, wisdom has variables, some more salient or important at one time than another. That’s because wisdom is alive; it moves.

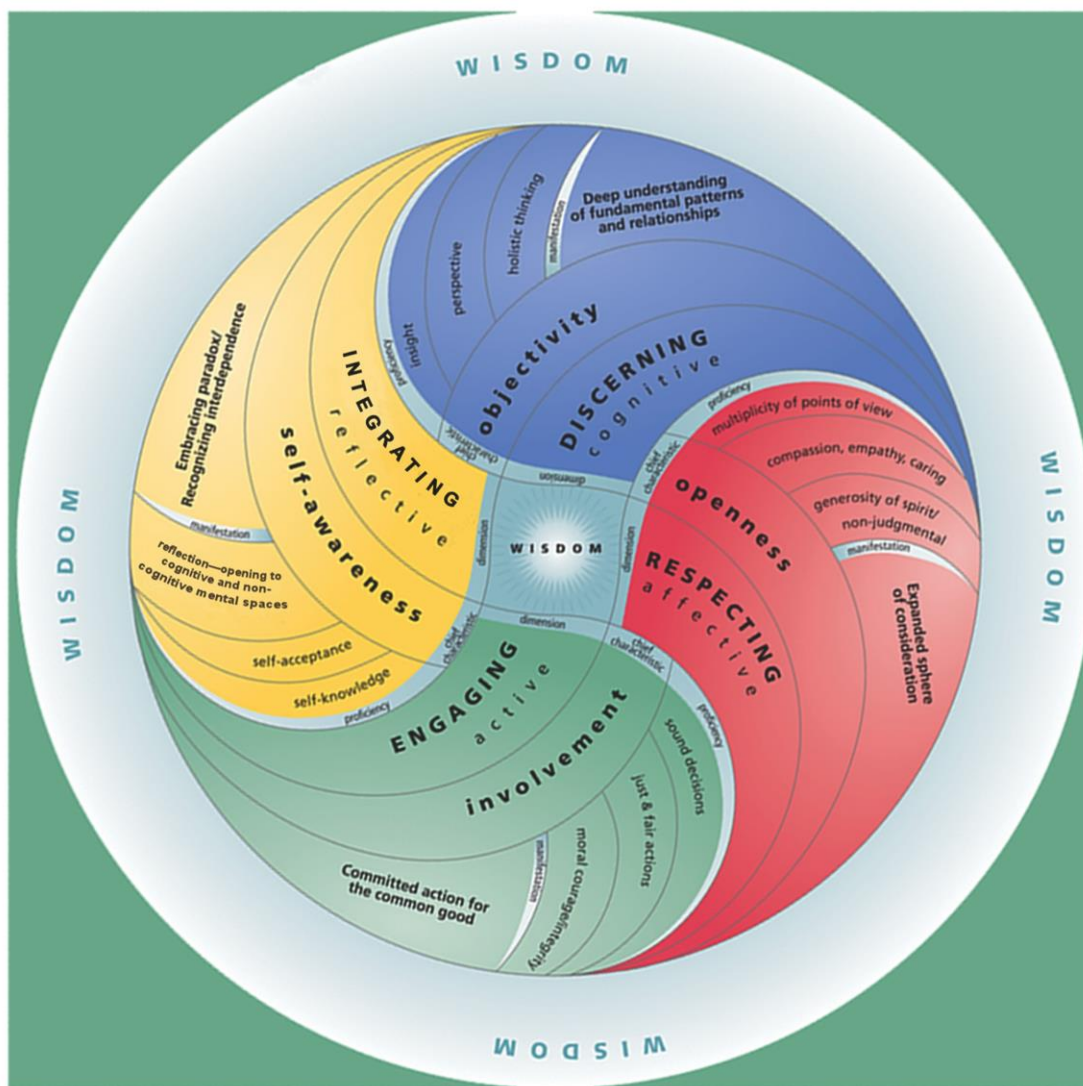


Figure 1. Emergent Wisdom Model © 2005 Caroline Bassett

Discernment is the dimension where one is detached and sees as objectively as possible what is going on, not according to what one would like the truth to be, but what is “really” there, as best one can tell. A caveat here: When I say, “to see as objectively as possible,” I can run into a deconstructionist attitude, where we never know what is real or true because our own perspectives and assumptions color what we see, no matter how hard we try not to let them – or no matter how hard we deny them. I certainly can recognize and agree with this deconstructionist claim about objectivity. However, as I am talking about practical wisdom that real people can use, I need to speak a language that most will understand. Hence, I maintain my assertion that we can look at a situation *as objectively as possible*. To help people do this, myself included, I suggest this exercise: whenever a situation arises and you think you understand it, think this in the next second: *This is a story that I am telling myself*. This is how I see the situation. Other people may well see it quite differently. Here is an example from a friend of mine: “I was standing in a street in Fort Bragg, California, headed to my car, when, all of a sudden, I heard a child screaming bloody murder, ‘No!! No!! No!!’ I turned around and looked, and here was a little boy, at most 4 or 5, trying to escape from a woman who was dragging him toward a truck parked near my car. What did I think? Two immediate thoughts – was he being kidnapped, likely by a ‘non-custodial parent’? Was this a truly terrible parent? What to do? Well, within a minute, along came another woman, likely the grandmother. Child is still shrieking and kicking. The new arrival says to me, ‘Oh, my – he’s having a meltdown. He’s autistic.’ That thought had not occurred to me at all. I’d only seen an autistic child ‘in motion’ once before; it wasn’t a possibility in my frame of reference” (Thorpe, 2009).

Returning to the model, *Respect* must be added, because, as a State Supreme Court Justice that I interviewed said, “You have to care. You have to care about people. You can’t just see clearly what’s going on – you have to care.” This, then, is the dimension where we give due regard for the right of others to be. Here we find heart, compassion, generosity of spirit. We also find another heart quality, gratitude, which represents a deep spiritual connection to the whole world and a sense of appreciation for all that is.

This dimension can manifest as what Wilber calls an expanded sphere of consideration or a more world-centric perspective (Wilber, 2006). As my heart grows larger, I consider the well-being of more and more people – not just my family or my relatives or my kind, but also increasing spheres that include people not like me and even the creatures of the earth. I can do this partly by taking the perspective or point of view of other people – what does the situation look like from their side of the street? Thus, I will have achieved a more complete view of the situation – and I will, perhaps, have stepped aside from my own subjectivity and assumptions – so that I can act in ways that enhance our common humanity.

Yet, seeing clearly and caring is not enough either. You have to act, which does not necessarily mean running for public office. It can mean writing letters to the editor or talking to others about what you see and know. Finally, the *Integration* dimension brings us inside ourselves – it is the center of our self and of our values. Its chief descriptor is recognition that the self is part of a much larger whole. A main proficiency is “Integrity,” which means that your outside (your behaviors) and your inside (your professed beliefs) match up pretty well. I say “pretty well” because no one is totally consistent.

In this dimension, we must know ourselves *and* we must accept ourselves. These are sometimes, alas, quite different. Further, this is where we can transform and grow in cognitive complexity, where we can move into higher stages of development (Walsh, 2011). As we become more objective in our perceptions, as we also expand our sphere of consideration, as we make good decisions, we can become more and more able to see beyond our own narrow self-interest and transcend our projections, moving beyond “individualistic concerns to more collective or universal ones” (Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990, p. 162). We can become wiser because we have done the work on ourselves and gained a certain amount of cognitive maturity.

This is all fine and good – and pretty abstract. Can we pin wisdom down a bit? Can wisdom, no matter the definition, be measured? Is this something that is possible to do? Some of the researchers discussed above have developed their own measures of wisdom, which are presented in the next section.

Seeing Wisdom through the Lens of Measures of Wisdom

A recent article by psychologists Glück, König, Naschenweng, Redzanowski, Dorner, Strasser, and Wiedemann (2013) provides an excellent overview of four measures of wisdom. Recognizing that interest in the study of wisdom is growing both inside and outside of psychology, the authors state that the concept of wisdom is being applied in a number of fields besides psychology and psychotherapy, such as leadership (Kilburg, 2012) and education (Sternberg, 2010), to which I add my own work (Bassett, 2011a). Which measure to use for which field of endeavor may be the question.

These authors present two ways of grouping measures of wisdom. In the first group we find self-report measures (Ardelt’s Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS), 2003; Webster’s Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS), 2003; and Levenson and colleagues’ Adult Self-Transcendence Inventory (ASTI), 2005). In the second group are performance-based measures (the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, (Baltes and Staudinger), 2000). In the self-reporting scales, individuals respond as they believe that they behave. In the other, participants give responses to wisdom-requiring problems.

Altogether, these scales measure both distinct and overlapping dimensions of wisdom, depending upon the author’s definition of wisdom. It is interesting to take a look at these dimensions from four of the measures, which I am deriving from Glück and colleagues’ (2013, p. 4) article. From Webster’s SAWS we find *openness* to alternate views and explanations, *emotional regulation* (“an exquisite sensitivity to the gross distinctions, subtle nuances, and complex blends of the full range of human affect” (Webster, 2007, p. 166)), *humor*, *critical life experience* (life experiences that are ambiguous and have unknown outcomes), and *reminiscence and reflection* (reflecting on past and present experiences to help deal with future difficulties).

Ardelt in her 3D-WS includes three major components of wisdom: a reflective dimension that is necessary to the development of the other two, which are cognitive (competence to think deeply) and affective (compassion for others’ difficulties). Unlike the others, the ASTI scale, which focuses on self-transcendence (and might be of interest to those with a background in integral studies) is partly based upon European and Asian wisdom literatures, from which four

general principles of wisdom derive: self-knowledge, detachment, integration, and self-transcendence. In what sounds like Buddhist language to me, self-knowledge refers to knowing the sources of one's sense of self; detachment directs our attention to the transience of things; integration means accepting all parts of one's self; and self-transcendence means "independence from external self-definitions and the dissolution of rigid boundaries between the self and others" (Glück et al, 2013, p. 5).

As another way of typing wisdom measures, the authors (Glück et al, 2013) distinguish between *personal wisdom* and *general wisdom*. Personal wisdom derives from personal experiences and insights from a person's own life; general wisdom is concerned with human life in general and is not necessarily related to personal wisdom. As examples, I would assume that in the first group we would find wise grandmothers, in the latter, people who have gained knowledge about life in general from reading. To me, however, I cannot think of an example of a person who has gained general wisdom third-hand without at least some engagement in the world. Abraham Lincoln, I would assert, had general wisdom in his insistence that the union hold, but where that knowledge came from, besides both personal observation and interactions as well as, perhaps reading, I do not know. The authors also add what they call *other-related wisdom* which can be translated as compassion, or as they put it, "empathy-based concern for both concrete other people and humankind at large" (Glück et al, p. 5). As compassion matures, it becomes what Wilber calls expanding realms of consideration (2006).

Regarding the relationship to age, the authors (Glück et al, 2013) found that wisdom does not generally increase with age (Glück and Bluck, 2011). However, most researchers expect that most demonstrations of wisdom will not come until people are generally in their 60's.

In summary, the authors (Glück et al, 2013) conclude that different kinds of instruments measure different aspects of wisdom. A person might choose one for one kind of activity or research purpose, another for a different one. All of these studies come from the social sciences. A different kind of research is also being done on wisdom and the brain.

Seeing Wisdom through the Lens of Neuroscience

Because of the overlap in assumptions with regards to what wisdom is and how it differs from intelligence and spirituality, a group of neuroscientists, psychiatrists, and wisdom researchers designed an expert consensus, two-phase Delphi study to do just that (Jeste, D. V., Ardel, M., Blazer, D., Kraemer, H. C., Vaillant, G., & Meeks, T. W. (2010).

The authors contacted 57 international wisdom experts (of whom this writer was one) with a Delphi instrument. Phase 2 resulted in significant agreement on nine of the 12 main characteristics of wisdom. The authors say,

...wisdom is a uniquely human but rare personal quality, which can be learned and measured, and increases with age through advanced cognitive and emotional development that is experience driven. At the same time, wisdom is not expected to increase by taking medication. (2010, p. 678)

The consensus found a slight overlap between wisdom and intelligence, with most, if not all researchers, agreeing that a basic level of intelligence is necessary. But, more than intelligence itself, the critical element of wisdom is the desire for learning and in-depth knowledge. Does this concept fit with the three types of wisdom that Glück and colleagues (2013) in the section above distinguish among (personal, general, and other-related wisdom)? It seems to me that it would fit with personal wisdom because an individual needs some level of intelligence, whether educated or even literate or not) and perhaps with general wisdom relates to human life in general. Again, it seems to me that illiterate shamans who are considered wise might have to have some knowledge of human life in general through their observations of life and human interactions around them.

As for the connection between wisdom and spirituality (the former often subsumed under the other in New Age thinking and in those sections of a bookstore), the authors (Jeste et. al, 2010) found that the two share pro-social attitudes such as compassion and other-centeredness. But, religion and religious practices are unrelated to wisdom, which suggests that wisdom does not require religious faith. At the same time, it seems that the respondents did not separate out religion from a broader sense of spirituality. The experts did agree that resilience and successful coping strategies were significantly more important components of wisdom than either intelligence or spirituality.

In a study of the neurobiology of wisdom, psychiatrists Meeks & Jeste (2009) used six of the sub-components of wisdom that researchers had identified: “pro-social attitudes / behaviors, ... social decision-making/pragmatic knowledge of life, ... emotional homeostasis, ... reflection / self-understanding, ... value relativism/tolerance, ... and acknowledgment of and dealing with uncertainty/ambiguity” (p. 356). The authors focused on the possible anatomical locations of these components in the brain determined through neuroimaging (p. 357) which showed how specific brain regions may interact to contribute to the performance of these subcomponents of wisdom. They summarized their findings by noting the “interplay and balance between older brain regions (e.g., limbic cortex) and the more recently evolved PFC (prefrontal cortex) in the putative neurobiology of wisdom” (p. 362). Also, they found that several characteristics associated with wisdom, such as the use of knowledge for the common good and the integration of affect and knowledge, show up in different parts of the brain from those used for intelligence and reasoning.

Having looked at analytical approaches to the study of wisdom, including different definitions of wisdom and measures of it as well as what brain scientists have to say about the subject, we wonder what other lenses can tell us. What would a focus on integral theory and post-conventional development show us about wisdom?

Wisdom through the Lens of Integral Theory

I cannot begin to synthesize the complexity of integral theory except to point out some of its most salient and useful features and refer people to Roger Walsh’s (2011) excellent article that explains it far better than I can. Most useful, perhaps, is the domains of reality (the four quadrants) and concepts of levels and lines of development. In *Integral Spirituality* Wilber (2006) presents the clearest and most complete discussion of his theories.

In the idea of the four quadrants – the interior I and We and the exterior It and Its, each on an individual and a collective level – yields a 2x2 table (see Walsh, 2011, p. 112). Walsh says that “understanding any phenomenon adequately requires investigating all of its four quadrants, and using methods appropriate to each quadrant” (p. 112). Further, he suggests that wisdom can be found in all four quadrants: in individuals as insight, in collectives in the cultural ethos (the interior half), and in the exterior side, in social constructions that embody individual and collective wisdom, such as legal and educational systems as well as contemplative institutions.

In terms of development, many psychologists describe people as maturing from pre-conventional to conventional to post-conventional levels. (See the following section on post-formal thought for a discussion on this topic.) In terms of integral theory, Wilber postulates post-post-conventional levels or transpersonal ones, as Walsh (2011) calls them.

Another useful concept is the one of developmental lines. It seems to me patently obvious that these exist – one has only to look around to see people who are extremely intelligent but morally stunted, who are exceptionally mature but seem not to have an esthetic bone in their bodies, and so on. (This reminds me of Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences where people present with different abilities. Intelligence can no longer be considered as logical-mathematical and verbal aptitudes only. Other intelligences include kinesthetic, spatial, and musical, for example (Gardner, 1993/2004)). Wilber (2006) suggests many lines: cognitive, moral, emotional, interpersonal, self-identity, esthetic, psychosexual, spiritual, and values (pp. 23-24). Perhaps there is also a wisdom line of development. To explore this idea further, in the next section we will continue our examination of a related aspect of integral studies, that is, post-conventional development.

Wisdom through the Lens of Post-Conventional Development

Like the phrase “post-modern,” “post-conventional” or “post-formal” tells us what it comes after, but not what it itself is. Perhaps it means exceptional maturity or uncommonly well-developed cognitive complexity or perspicacious post-formal thinking (or logic). Indeed, there is no common language to express a qualitative difference in thinking about self and world. Nevertheless, I want to take a little time to discuss the movement from conventional to post-conventional thought because it can provide insights into where we can find wisdom, how we can develop it, and how we can get into trouble with it, too. “What passes for morality or spirituality in the vast majority of people’s lives is the way everybody they grew up with thinks.” So says Father Richard Rohr who writes about spirituality in the two halves of life and how we can deepen our experience in the second (2011, p. 83). His statement exemplifies the conventional level of development mentioned in the section above. And, don’t forget Emily Dickinson who tells us that the majority prevails and if you are deemed different, watch out!

But why is it important to turn our attention to the movement to post-conventional thinking? Why does it matter? It does matter. It matters because newly emergent capacities such as making decisions undistorted (relatively speaking) by personal agendas, suspending what is already known, and being open to new ways of seeing and understanding things, can lead to more accurate meaning-making. Or, as educator Jack Mezirow (1990) puts it,

perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. *More inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspectives are superior perspectives* that adults choose if they can because they are motivated to better understand the meaning of their experience. (p. 14. italics in original)

Or, we can look to Kegan's (1994) orders of consciousness to help us comprehend the differences in the thought processes. The top three orders are of interest to us. In the third, which is congruent with conventional levels of development, people think what they *should* think. They believe that what they *should* feel is what they *do* feel and what they *should* value is what they *do* value. You can see that here, as Emily Dickinson says, the majority prevails. The predominant way of understanding the world and one's place in it does not just guide our thinking – it determines it. In the fourth order, however, a person becomes what Kegan calls self-authoring. That is, she determines for herself what she thinks, feels, values, even if it conflicts with or subverts prevalent ideas and standards. This is a self-determining level. She knows her own mind independent of cultural expectations or assumed truths. She sets limits and maintains boundaries, thus gaining her own sense of authority or voice. While someone at the third order could be torn apart by competing roles or expectations from external persons – for example, how to be a good worker and a good parent – at the fourth order a person has more options. This person will have a larger perspective from which to make sense of expectations, thus allowing her to independently figure out for herself what will work in this situation or context.

Here is an example. One day when I was teaching a class on Kegan's work, a student suddenly sprang up from his chair. "I get it!" he shouted. "I get it!" Then he explained to us what he meant. He worked at the post office. A recent order had been received from management for people to organize and work in teams, which he and his co-workers did, discovering that this was a good way to get their work done and even experiment with innovations. But their supervisor kept on finding fault with their work and giving them a hard time. Nothing they did was right, despite the fact that they were following top management's orders. What the student suddenly understood was that he and his co-workers were pursuing their tasks in a more independent way than they had been – in short, in a fourth order way. But the supervisor was a third order man for whom independent actions smacked of insubordination and disobedience. He was used to things working in a certain "right" way and felt insecure and challenged when those who reported to him acted in more self-determining ways.

In the fifth order, at which few people arrive, individuals begin to see how their own personal system (that, in the fourth order, has become independent of externally imposed societal expectations and assumptions through critical reflection of what works and what doesn't) is mediated by historical, cultural, psychological, and other forces. In the fourth order, you are the system that you have created. But in the fifth, a person comes to a realization of the constructed nature of his or her meaning-making system. She understands that who she is, is simply one system among many. This means that rampant individualism, which is a downside of fourth order consciousness ("this works for me, and I am going to do it this way"), becomes tempered by understanding that I, like you, am part of larger systems. There is a foreground/background

shift (like Kohlberg's (1981) seventh stage). "I am not very important after all." It is a humbling stance.

What does all of this have to do with wisdom? Is someone at the fourth order wiser than someone at the third? Or is fifth order thinking better than fourth? I cannot but think that in some ways this is the case, especially if we look back at Mezirow's words on more inclusive, permeable, and integrating perspectives as being superior because they lead to more accurate meaning-making. Or, in terms of wisdom, perhaps, this perspective offers more accurate ways of seeing – of discerning, respecting and caring, acting fairly, and integrating various elements of self with the rest of the world, deepening the ability to see beyond the self, to deal with the paradoxes that life presents, and to recognize more and more deeply the interdependence of all things. But, do we really know if such recognition makes a substantive, permanent difference?

So far, we have been looking through various lenses mostly at one end of the spectrum, the analytical side, except for some examples from the arts. Let us now turn to looking at wisdom in action, in real people's lives. This is the subject of the next section.

Seeing Wisdom through the Lens of Everyday Life

We fret a lot these days about the apparent surfeit of information, coming at us from all directions. Information can be a good thing – it can be helpful to us, amusing and entertaining; it can make us more effective in our jobs. But it can distract us, fracturing our concentration. Too much information is un-wisdom because wisdom is about knowing what is important and what to do about it. Wisdom can help us to discern what information is important and what, if anything, to do about it. Wisdom is about taking the time to reflect, sort, distinguish, triage, hierarchize. What is important in this situation? How can I tell? What should I do? What's right? These are the questions to ask, which an unimpeded flow of information can continually interrupt until we find ourselves flattened under a heap of data and ideas, some conflicting, all demanding to be paid attention to. Wisdom requires a different kind of mindset – unless a more modern brain than mine can sort and prioritize and make decisions in a different way than mine does – and given technology and how it seems to be changing brains, this may yet be possible.

Yang (2008) offers us a way that might help us handle this information overflow. She argued that wisdom is a real-life process. This means that in an everyday difficult situation a person makes an unusual integration, embodies his or her ideas through action, and brings forth good results. Thus, the steps are the sorting and prioritizing of what is important, arriving at an integration of ideas that could work in a problematic situation, acting upon this integration, and achieving positive effects. She says, "People may accomplish all kinds of good work, but unless the consequences of their actions bettered their own lives and those of others, their actions cannot be deemed as being related to wisdom" (p. 73). This view and that of most other wisdom researchers in one form or another, including mine, reflects the philosophy called pragmatism where the focus lies not in a description of "reality" or of the concept of reality but rather what is useful, what succeeds, what works. If wisdom isn't practical and useful, what do you want it for? How does anyone know you have some wisdom if you don't use it?

Besides other examples that I have given, such as my student (and Evelyn in the next section), here is one from ordinary life. Note that I say “wisdom” or perhaps it should read “wise behavior.” In South Sudan a group of American doctors intentionally brought warring factions together. As a condition of free cataract surgery the ophthalmologists insisted that people from rival ethnic groups sit together and talk. One patient said, “I always thought in many ways that the Dinka were devils and had horns, but they’re just like us” (Straziuso, 2014, p. A7).

So far, we have looked at wisdom through a number of lenses. Now I will turn to show you what I see through my own.

Seeing Wisdom through My Own Lens: What I’ve Learned about Wisdom

I have read the literature. I have interviewed people deemed wise by others. I have been a keen observer of both events and environments, and I have settled upon the following four essential propositions about wisdom.

Here are the four propositions:

1. Wisdom is complex, just like the world we live in. It is not one thing but rather results from the interaction of an indefinite number of elements (because we cannot identify all of them, though I believe that I have a handle of some of them in the model).
2. Wisdom is useful to us in our daily lives. It is available to all of us.
3. Wisdom lies on a continuum; it is not as rare as we think.
4. We can enhance our own wisdom and encourage it in others.

Wisdom is Complex

This is the first proposition, and I have explained the relationships and interactions of the various elements of wisdom above in the Emergent Wisdom Model. They include Discernment, Respect, Engagement, and Integration. Note that the model is neither static nor linear; rather it is dynamic and builds on constant interaction of all the elements.

Is it possible that wisdom is, after all, simple because oftentimes we recognize it when we see it? It is true that we recognize it when we see it because we see it as a whole, not as a collection of parts. However, it is also complex because to produce it you need the interaction of an indefinite number of variables. That blend forms a pattern, so that when we see it in action, we see it as wisdom. For example, I could give you a list of parts and most likely you would not know what they were for: *“drafthood, reducer ring, baffle assembly, heat trap, cold water dip tube, anode rod, temperature and pressure relief valve, drain valve, thermostat, manifold, orifice, main burner, pilot assembly, pilot tube, thermocouple, screw 10-32 x .312 PH RD MACH, pilot shield, inner door, outer door, palnut, air shutter.*

“Here is a picture of the *relationships* among these items assembled into a whole:



However, if I had told you that they represented all the parts of a water heater, you would immediately recognize it as such” (Thorpe, 2009). Thus, wisdom may look simple but is complex in the integration of all of the relationships that comprise it. We need to remember, looking back at the wisdom model, that embracing paradox is part of wisdom.

Wisdom is useful to us in our daily lives; it is available to all of us

The second proposition states that wisdom is useful to us in our daily lives. Wisdom lies in the stratosphere, but it also in the air around us all the time, if we can recognize it in its more humble aspects.

Just because a decision is not changing the course of human history or forwarding a movement as Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, did, does not mean that wisdom is not occurring. Here is a simple example that one could claim is “just” common sense. Perhaps it is common sense. At the same time, it does what wisdom does: it focuses on what is important and what to do about it. It demonstrates sufficient awareness of a number of the aspects of wisdom and uses them in a way that makes the situation better for all involved.

Evelyn, a student in a class of mine, told us about a predicament that she had been in until she figured out a solution that worked for everyone, even if her daughter was not entirely happy with it. Evelyn had recently retired from a busy job as an attorney in a law firm and was enjoying her freedom for the first time in her adult life. She took short or long trips; she joined two book clubs; she took up photography with regular classes from a master photographer. So, when her daughter, who had just given birth to twins, wanted Evelyn to spend nights at her house to care for the babies, Evelyn was understandably reluctant. At the same time, she felt an obligation to help her daughter out, and she wanted to too. How could she do both?

In class she had learned about stepping outside of herself and looking at the whole picture, from a third person point of view. Here was a mother of just-born twins who needed help and wanted it from her own mother. Here was a woman of just-gained freedom in retirement who wanted to enjoy life. In this situation, what actions would satisfy both parties?

Evelyn realized that she could not give up all of her freedom, nor could she ignore her daughter’s needs. So she decided to spend two nights a week at the twins’ home and then give her daughter some money to hire someone for other nights. Was the daughter altogether happy

because it would be “just for a few months”? No. But her mother stood firm with her decision. Six months later Evelyn told me that it had all worked out just fine.

Here is another example. One day in the summer of 2010 at a baseball game (Detroit Tigers-Cleveland Indians), a pitcher was throwing a perfect no-hitter, but at the bottom of the ninth inning, the umpire called the batter safe at first base, when replays showed that, in fact, the batter was out. Did the pitcher stomp over to the umpire, yell in his face, throw his glove on the ground, swear, and turn red with fury? No. Instead, the umpire, Jim Joyce, personally apologized to the pitcher Armando Galarraga saying that he was wrong (Kepner, 2010). Further, in a number of interviews, Joyce publicly acknowledged his mistake. Galarraga said that he told the umpire, “Nobody’s perfect.” What a way to defuse a situation.

In both stories, the people involved ended up feeling better about the situation at the end than at the beginning. They show us examples of relatively wise behavior on a small, often personal, scale. These are examples of little wisdoms, rather than big wisdom. Little wisdoms and big wisdom both involve complex, dynamic elements. (Recall the concept that wisdom is a fractal, a scale-independent self-similarity. That is, no matter the size or scale – scale independence – wisdom looks the same – self-similarity. All of the parts are replicated, though on different scales.) What makes the wisdoms different – and are they? Next, we’ll look at the continuum of wisdom.

Wisdom lies on a continuum; it is not as rare as we think

Most researchers believe that wisdom is rare, that along with being the “pinnacle or hallmark of adult thinking” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 351), it is not achieved very often. The neuroscientists that I cited above in the section on neuroscience (Jeste, Ardelt, Blazer, Kraemer, Vaillant, & Meeks, 2010) believe, paradoxically, that wisdom is both a rare quality and one that is distributed across the population. When they speak of wisdom, they are seeing it as a trait that manifests at the far end of what I am calling the wisdom continuum. That is, for me, wisdom is not an either-or, you-have-it-or-you-don’t, you-are-wise-or-you-are-not-wise proposition. Rather, it is something that lies on a continuum. If we look only at the far end of the continuum, then all we find is that rare wisdom that lies several standard deviations from the mean. Does this mean that there is no wisdom other than that at the extreme? What about the little wisdoms I mentioned above? For this reason, I believe that we can understand wisdom better if we see it on this continuum.

Actually, a better image is three continua. The first is a continuum of wise people; the second is on the impact of a person’s wisdom; and the third has to do with the nature of the wise decision itself. The first continuum extends from you and me to people like Nelson Mandela who united a whole country that could easily have been torn apart by racial violence after apartheid ended.

Within this continuum it is likely, as Bluck and Glück suggest, that wisdom will manifest differently in different phases of life and that the “full use of one’s wisdom appears to be a developmental achievement” (2004, p. 569). How is it that some people have more wisdom than others? Some individuals simply come into the world with a greater propensity for wisdom than

others do, just as some people are naturally gifted as tennis players or sculptors or mathematicians. The wise ones would grow in cognitive and emotional complexity as they mature, increasing in wisdom as they move through life, just as we can on a smaller scale.

The second, and closely related, is the continuum of the impact of the person's wisdom, in which Nelson Mandela's would have far greater repercussions than anything I would ever do. Those we look to as wise are usually leaders or major public figures, such as Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela – and this is one way that we know about them and their wisdom. For the less visible among us, our wisdom is little known. In classes that I teach or talks that I give, I ask the participants to identify a wise person that they know personally. Many name a grandfather or aunt or friend of the family, someone with no public sway at all. When pressed, the participants give examples of activities that correspond with the definition of wisdom on a small personal level with little if any public impact.

The third continuum is about the nature of the wise decision in and of itself, some decisions requiring more insight and depth of understanding of patterns and relationships (the Discernment dimension of the Emergent Wisdom Model) as well as more toleration for paradox and ambiguity (the Integration dimension) than others do. For example, Abraham Lincoln's decision to go to war with the seceding South in order to keep together the union of the people, by the people, and for the people – this first-time experiment in governance that the world had ever seen – certainly was a more difficult and nuanced one than Evelyn's on how to balance her needs with her daughter's.

What about the rest of us without a strong inborn propensity for wisdom? Is there any way that we can increase our own wisdom intentionally, or is it a matter of luck? In the next section, I discuss some ways that we can develop our wisdom.

We can enhance our own wisdom and encourage it in others

The fourth proposition asserts that we can intentionally enhance our own wisdom and encourage it in others. The latter first: an easy way to do this is to point out to your friend, neighbor, or colleague when he or she is acting wisely. Comment on it. Acknowledge it. This way, two things happen. First, the person realizes that she has done something wise and, because of this realization, may be more likely to do so again in the future. Second, the very fact of publicly acknowledging something as wise brings it more to our awareness and thus we may notice it around us more.

As for the former, enhancing our own wisdom, I have recently written several chapters that include a number of strategies for doing just this (Bassett, 2006; Bassett, 2011a; Bassett, 2011b). Here I will discuss three.

First, there is the technique of looking at yourself in the third person. Tell a story about yourself with you as one character among many, perhaps not the main one. Tell the story from the point of view of another character, and see what happens. Insights may arise as you probe other psyches and points of view.

Second, refer to the Emergent Wisdom Model and at the bottom in the section called “Queries,” you will see a number of questions to ask yourself when you are in a difficult situation that requires wisdom to get out of. These queries should become second nature to you and ring in your mind like a beloved melody. Ask yourself what is really going on, not what you would like. There can be a big difference. Ask yourself how someone else would view the same situation. Ask yourself what you want to accomplish with a decision and how it will affect not only yourself, but also others. Who might these others be? What might happen? Finally, ask yourself if your decisions are bettering not only yourself but also the lives of others.

Third, and an assignment that I give students or workshop participants for life, is what I call Wisdom Watch. It means looking for wisdom around you, in the street, on the job, on television or in movies, anywhere. Wisdom is out there and the more we acknowledge it, the more we will recognize it in the future.

Wisdom Emerges; It Does Not Conclude

We have looked at wisdom through various lenses, including definitions of wisdom, different measures of wisdom, neuroscience, integral theory, post-conventional development, everyday life, my own lens, and we have looked directly at it, in the lives of people. We will all continue to look for – and at – real wisdom in real lives. Here is one more look, at a man who practiced wisdom all his life and who sang of it, using the words of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 – Pete Seeger:

To everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
 There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
 And a time for every purpose, under Heaven.

A time to be born, a time to die
 A time to plant, a time to reap
 A time to kill, a time to heal
 A time to laugh, a time to weep
 ...
 A time to build up, a time to break down
 A time to dance, a time to mourn
 A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together.
 ...
 A time of love, a time of hate
 A time of war, a time of peace
 A time you may embrace, a time to refrain from embracing

To everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
 There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
 And a time for every purpose, under Heaven.

Anyone who speaks (or sings) these words knows a thing or two about wisdom – that it is not one thing and that it contains contradictions and paradox, that it contains multitudes. At the same time, knowing every purpose is just one part of wisdom. The other is knowing when it is time to

build up and, when the time comes to break down, *how* to do it. This is the other part of wisdom – having sufficient awareness to know not only the *what* of a thing but also the *when* and the *how*. It is a lifelong practice, a never-ending song.

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