

THE WISE ONES
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From Proverbs 8
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Of the people in your life, living and died, who is/was the wisest?

I'm not asking about the smartest or the highest IQ. Nor about the best educated, the highest achiever, the most successful in the world's terms. But who was or is the wisest? Who had or has life figured out? Whose wisdom do you hope to emulate, share, live, pass on?

Where did their wisdom come from? Were they just born wise? Some of the wisest things I've heard have come out of the mouths of children.

But there is also the wisdom of the elders, which like good soup seems to come from long simmering of experience, lived joy and sadness. Yet there is also the wisdom of young people. I spend 30 Wednesday evenings with young people in our Confirmation program, and I'm always astonished at the wisdom I hear on those Wednesdays.

The text from Proverbs says that wisdom is a gift of God's Holy Spirit – that the Spirit, as Lady Wisdom, calls and invites everyone to understanding. So that whatever else wisdom is, wisdom is the voice, the calling, the will of God in our lives.

Could it be then, that the wisest are those who listen to what is deepest in the human soul?

Who are they for you? Those who personify wisdom, who listen to Lady Wisdom's call.

Wisdom is different from intelligence and brain power – isn't it? To suggest that, is not to be anti-intellectual or denigrate educational achievement. It's just that not all smart people are wise people. There are lots of very educated, bright minds in the corporate offices of Goldman-Sachs and British Petroleum. But is there wisdom?

The wise ones in your life – what attributes, life qualities made them wise?

Isn't there a calmness, an inner peace about them? Midst the adrenaline charged franticness of the pace of life and the expectations that more can be done in less time, isn't wisdom the voice of the one in our lives who asks, "What really matters here?"

And they seem to always have time – the wise one – time for sunsets, poems, and bird watching, time for child blessings, time to be a listening ear.

And the wise ones are like lighthouses – aren't they? They provide spiritual and moral points of reference. In a culture so prone to material and emotional excess, the wise ones in our lives gently yet firmly say, "That's enough now."

Who's been that lighthouse, that voice of Lady Wisdom for you?

My hunch is that the wise ones in your life were and are the most humble. Not in a self-effacing way, but the truly wise know what they don't know; they don't need to get in the last word; they can admit it when wrong; they know when to rethink, reevaluate, and let go of some old cherished truth.

And they are also the most forgiving – aren't they? They don't make excuses for bad behavior, but they don't hang onto old hurt. They don't wish anyone ill, even a rival or enemy. The truly wise understand that life is too precious and short to waste any of it in vindictive anger or trying to even the score of hurt.

And how different the sound of the wise ones from the loud, in your face, rage-filled voices that currently dominate talk radio, cable news, the blogs, and most political rhetoric. For the voice of wisdom is not the loudest, or the one who can recite the most facts, or the one who claims to have seen it all before.

Rather, the wise one speaks quietly. The wise one also listens without presuming to already know. And the wise one does not write others off just because they disagree.

So who have been the wise ones, the teachers and liverers of wisdom in your life? In whose wisdom have you heard something sacred and timelessly true?

The wise ones in my life have all been bridge builders. They constantly resisted the pressure to divide people into "us" and "them," or to withdraw into enclaves and tribes of self-interest and ideology and identity politics. The truly wise have reminded me over and over that we need each other, even as they constantly enlarged the circle of connection and community.

And the wisdom teachers I've had in my life have all had that ability to wear and walk in another's shoes, to see and feel life as someone else experiences things. For wisdom – life wisdom – is less about what you know than about how wide your embrace.

Silently, then, name them – the wise ones in your life, the ones who personify the calling of God's Spirit of Wisdom.

In your head, can you hear them laugh? Because the wise ones can laugh at themselves, at human pretense and self-righteousness. The wise ones know that when people are out of sorts with each other, laughter can break the cycle of anger and withdrawal enough for people to risk love again.

Oh, not that life has come easy for the wise ones. Sometimes the wisest have had the most pain. But the pain didn't harden or embitter them – did it? So sometimes the wisdom they imparted was without words, in a touch or shared tear that communicated, "I understand. I'm sorry."

For the wise ones in our lives, know how to live and love without answers.

Yet, the truly wise ones were and are also the most joyous. They can find the good and beauty that eludes us. They can delight in small things and can see the sacred in the ordinary. For the truly wise know that each day is miracle and gift enough, and must not be allowed to slip away unsavored and unappreciated.

I believe that a big part of what makes the wise ones wise is that they know something about death. They know that death is a part of the life God has given us to live. They just don't play the game of denial that is so costly, emotionally and financially, in our society.

So of the wise ones we remember today who have died, some believed there is more after death and some told us they didn't know. But they all had made their peace with it – human mortality. And that serenity allowed them to live more fully – didn't it?

The wise ones in our lives showed us how to die, which really was a showing us how to live....

According to the Proverbs text, wisdom is also that attribute of God, that dimension of God, which rejoices and delights in the human race. Wisdom dances in and through our lives, creating joy in our lives and in the universe.

Who are they, then, the wise ones who also rejoiced and delighted in you? And their rejoicing in you is a reflection of God's delight....