



# TOUCHSTONES

## a monthly journal of Unitarian Universalism

June 2018

# Wisdom

# Wisdom Story



## **Introduction to the Theme**

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

T.S. Eliot wrote, "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

In this day and age, we are overwhelmed by information, much of it trivia. The task of sifting through this mountain of chaff to find a few grains of knowledge can be daunting.

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. One of our Unitarian Universalist sources refers

to "wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life." Wisdom in these traditions is not the beliefs and doctrines that are so divisive, rather it is the pearls that each has cultivated over millennia beginning with a piece of coarse sand and shaping it and adding to it until something of enduring value is formed. This pearl of wisdom, which is of considerable value then begins, in its own way, to form and re-form the tradition.

Wisdom is not simply a quality of being, it is practical in the sense that it informs and guides action. Wisdom 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.

In his classic reflection, *All I Ever Really Needed To Know I Learned In Kindergarten*, Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum wrote, "Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but right there in the sandbox at nursery school." To live well, we

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## Wisdom & the Common Good

Wisdom involves seeking, finding, and implementing the good. Wisdom emerges by attending to many things: history, culture, emotions (especially fear), knowledge, politics, desire, assumptions, ambition, ego, power, prejudice, sacrifice, willfulness and willingness, pessimism and optimism, experience, faith, aspiration, idealism, and so much more. All of these are necessary ingredients for the alchemist (and we are all alchemists) to blend in varying proportions to distill some small measure of wisdom. It is only with this wisdom that we can begin to imagine a good that is both common and uncommon, but wisdom alone will not make it so. We must marry action to wisdom and pursue that relationship to the end.

*Touchstones is committed to exploring liberal theology. This journal is supported by subscriptions from Unitarian Universalist congregations. For daily meditations, photos, and more visit/like Touchstones at <https://www.facebook.com/Touchpossibility/>*

# **Six Blind Men & the Elephant**

*an old fable as retold for Branches, All Souls  
Unitarian Church, Tulsa, OK and adapted  
by Rev. Gretchen Hale*



In a valley, along a river, there lived six men. These men all happened to have been born blind. These men

loved to talk about how smart they were. They loved to tell stories that showed off how much they knew, and exchange ideas about the ways of truth.

One day, however, they started to argue about the elephant. What an elephant looked like, what it resembled, its size, all this. Had any of them ever seen the elephant? No, yet, they couldn't stop arguing.

And so they decided to go out and find an elephant. They hired a guide and set out early one morning. They went through the forest until finally, they came to a clearing where there was a huge bull elephant, just standing there, thinking about what he might eat for the day. The men were very excited to finally get clear about the elephant, and settle their argument once and for all.

As they approached the elephant, they formed a circle around it, and then one by one, the men took turns going up to touch the elephant. Using their hands, they tried to understand its shape, its form. And because they were in a circle, they each were touching a different part of the animal.

The first one, as he was feeling his part, cried out, "Oh, my brothers, as sure

*(Continued on page 2)*

# Reimagining the Common Good

## Wisdom Story

(Continued from page 1)

as I am smart, this elephant is like a great mud wall, baked hard in the sun."

"Oh, no," the second said, "now, my brothers, I can tell you what shape this elephant is—he is exactly like a spear." The other men smiled in disbelief.

"Why, dear brothers, do you not see," said the third man, "this elephant is very much like a rope." The others snorted.

"Goodness, brothers," the fifth man called out, "even a blind man can see what shape the elephant resembles most. Why he's just like a fan."

"Ha, I thought as much," the fourth man declared excitedly, "This elephant much resembles a serpent." Of course, no one believed him.

And finally, it was the sixth man's turn. As he felt his way along the elephant, he proclaimed: "This sturdy pillar, known as the great elephant, feels exactly like the trunk of a giant palm tree."



So - their curiosity satisfied, the men all linked hands and followed the guide back to the village. Once there, seated beneath a waving palm, the six blind men began arguing—loud and long. Each now had his own opinion, firmly based on his own experience, of what an elephant is really like. For after all, each had felt the elephant for himself and knew that he was right! And indeed he was. Yet depending on how the elephant is seen, each blind man was partly right, though all were wrong.

## Unconventional Wisdom

### Stand By This Faith

Rev. Naomi King

The question...: What does it mean for us to stand with our faith, ...to stand with this church?

This is not ...a new question ...or ...unique to Unitarian Universalists. But the answer to this question almost always means going against conventional wisdom, bucking social trends and ...

expectations.

...It is work. It is work for our teens ...our children ...our elders and for ourselves.

Because living faith-full lives requires courage and

stamina. Courage because you're bucking conventional wisdom just being here. The more you give yourself to hope and act..., the more you're working against the conventional wisdom.

The conventional wisdom says: only a few people are worth caring about; get everything for yourself that you can; if you aren't wealthy, it's your fault; if you aren't happy, it's your fault; and you better hope to get to heaven someday.

You are here ...where we say: everyone is worth caring about, even if we have to struggle to see that; we can have enough money and time and give to others, too; there is such a thing as social inequity and we're working to change that; happiness requires a great many things, and it begins here in human connection and caring; and heaven or not, we need to get to work here and now.

What we do here extends beyond these doors, throughout everything we do and touch in our entire lives. ....We are making the choice ...to stand with this faith, and to make hope real.

Source: an excerpt from the sermon, *Stand By This Faith*, by Rev. Naomi King

## Spiritual Humility

### Becoming Wise

Krista Tippet

...I have seen that wisdom emerges precisely through those moments when we have to hold seemingly opposing realities in a creative tension and interplay: power and frailty, birth and death, pain and hope, beauty and brokenness, mystery and conviction, calm and buoyancy, mine and yours.



This kind of conversation ... is, like poetry, a tribute to the human capacity to articulate truth at the edges of what words can touch [and]... the limits of ...

words, acknowledging their necessary humility.

Humility is a ...virtue to name and beckon here. It is woven through lives of wisdom and resilience. ...Spiritual humility is not about getting small, not about debasing oneself, but about approaching everything and everyone else with a readiness to see goodness and to be surprised. This is the humility of a child, which Jesus lauded. It is the humility of the scientist and the mystic. It has a lightness of step, not a heaviness of heart. That lightness is the surest litmus test I know for recognizing wisdom when you see it in the world or feel its stirrings in yourself. The questions that can lead us are already alive in our midst, waiting to be summoned and made real.

...The mystery and art of living are as grand as the sweep of a lifetime and the lifetime of a species. And they are as close as beginning, quietly, to mine whatever grace and beauty, whatever healing and attentiveness, are possible in this moment and the next and the next one after that.

Source: *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* by Krista Tippett, Penguin Press, 2016

# Readings from the Common Bowl



**Day 1:** "The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than

society gathers wisdom." Isaac Asimov

**Day 2:** "Normal day, let me be aware of the treasure you are. Let me not pass you by in quest of some rare and perfect tomorrow." Mary Jean Irion

**Day 3:** "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." Aristotle

**Day 4:** "The older I grow, the more I distrust the familiar doctrine that age brings wisdom." H.L. Mencken

**Day 5:** "It is not that I'm so smart. But I stay with the questions much longer." Albert Einstein

**Day 6:** "To become a great, cracked, wide-open door into nowhere is Wisdom." May Sarton

**Day 7:** "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."

T.S. Eliot

**Day 8:** "We must be willing to let go of the life we planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us." Joseph Campbell

**Day 9:** "Sometimes, if you stand on the bottom rail of a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known." A.A. Milne

**Day 10:** "Look at everything as though you were seeing it either for the first or last time."...Betty Smith

**Day 11:** "I'm not waiting until my hair turns white to become patient and wise. Nope, I'm dying my hair tonight." Jarod Kintz

**Day 12:** "The measure of intelligence is the ability to change." Albert Einstein

**Day 13:** "Wonder is the beginning of wisdom." Socrates

**Day 14:** "There is a wisdom of the head, and... there is a wisdom of the heart." Charles Dickens

**Day 15:** "People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within." Elizabeth Kübler-Ross

**Day 16:** "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for the day." Abraham Lincoln

**Day 17:** "Wisdom cannot be imparted. Wisdom that a wise person attempts to impart always sounds like foolishness to someone else. Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. One can find it, live it, do wonders through it, but one cannot communicate and teach it." Hermann Hesse

**Day 18:** "Wisdom, after all, is not a station you arrive at, but a manner of traveling." Sue Monk Kidd

**Day 19:** "Keep me away from the wisdom which does not cry, the philosophy which does not laugh...." Kahlil Gibran

**Day 20:** "We thought, because we had power, we had wisdom." Stephen Vincent Benet

**Day 21:** "We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us." Marcel Proust

**Day 22:** "Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise; seek what they sought." Bashō

**Day 23:** "It takes a very long time to become young." Pablo Picasso

**Day 24:** "If you don't have a strategy, you're part of someone else's strategy." Alvin Toffler

**Day 25:** "I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power the greater it will be." Thomas Jefferson

**Day 26:** "To invent your own life's meaning is not easy, but it's still allowed, and I think you'll be happier for the trouble." Bill Watterson

**Day 27:** "What wisdom can you find greater than kindness." Jean-Jacques Rousseau

**Day 28:** "Gratitude is the beginning of wisdom. Stated differently, true wisdom cannot be obtained unless it is built on a foundation of true humility and gratitude." Gordon B. Hinckley



**Day 29:** "The small wisdom is like water in a glass: clear, transparent, pure. The great wisdom is like the water in the sea: dark, mysterious, impenetrable." Rabindranath Tagore

**Day 30:** "A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices." William James

**Day 31:** "Wisdom ceases to be wisdom when it becomes too proud to weep, too grave to laugh, and too selfish to seek other than itself." Kahlil Gibran



## Faith and Theology

### Wisdom's House

Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt

*Wisdom has built her house; she has carved its seven pillars.<sup>2</sup> She has prepared a great banquet, mixed the wines, and set the table.<sup>3</sup> She has sent her servants to invite everyone to come. She calls out from the heights overlooking the city.<sup>4</sup> "Who is ignorant? Let them step this way." To those who lack good judgment, she says,<sup>5</sup> "Come, eat my food, and drink the wine I have mixed.<sup>6</sup> Leave your foolish ways behind, and begin to live; learn wisdom."* (Proverbs 9:1-6, New Living Translation, adapted)

[This] reading ...is taken from the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Scriptures.... In every one of the classical theological languages, the word for Wisdom is feminine. In Hebrew, it is *hokma*; in Latin, it is *sapientia*, in Greek, it is *Sophia*.

...There is a deep wisdom to be found in the Unitarian Universalist path; it is a wisdom that is drawn from many sources and finds expression in many ways. ...One of the central questions for every generation of Unitarian Universalists is this one: *How do we construct wisdom's house in our own time?*

In this ...passage of Proverbs, the house that wisdom builds includes seven pillars. ...Seven is often a recurring number in the evolving stories of Wisdom; similar images occur again in the book of Isaiah, chapter 11, when the prophet refers to the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, and a reverential respect for the God of their understanding.

Many of us in the free religious tradition have forsaken familiarity with traditional scripture. We are frightened away from it by its appropriation by our more conservative brothers and sisters, who are apt to use the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as a weapon to wound and to exclude. Yet when we succumb to this lure, we give up a precious part of our Unitarian and Uni-

versalist heritage. We lose the opportunity to understand ourselves and our roots in the dissenting tradition of

Christianity, a dissenting tradition that, in every age, has transformed the religious landscape by opening doors to fresh thought and new insight. When we abandon this ancient wisdom, we abandon some of our most useful tools.

...We, as liberal religious people, have a role to play in the building of wisdom's house; we have seven pillars of our own.... The first three of our seven pillars



are ... freedom, reason, and tolerance.... It is our commitment to freedom-- to believe or to doubt, to seek and to question, to reject or to embrace the life of the spirit—that most often distinguishes us from our brothers and sisters in other faith communities. It is our commitment to reason—our confidence in the right and responsibility of human beings everywhere to bring to bear in matters of faith all the powers of the mind—that has protected us from blind obedience and mindless submission to authority of every kind. It is our commitment to tolerance—the willingness to be open to those who differ from us in sect or class, in nation or race, in gender or theology—that has helped us hold fast to the vision of an earth made fair and all her people one.

These three pillars—freedom, reason, tolerance—are our historic foundation as Unitarian Universalists. ...To build wisdom's house, we must [also] renew our hope. Not the naïve and unrealistic hope of the privileged who assume there is a

solution for every problem, and that every story will end happily ever after. Instead, we must cultivate a bedrock hope that comes from a different attitude toward life. It is an attitude often learned by those who have seen the worst that life has to offer, yet in spite of everything see beyond those experiences to the power, the presence, [and] the life that undergirds life....

Our religious communities must reacquaint themselves with love. Not the benign and often anemic love that expresses itself as polite and friendly feeling among neighbors, but the love that asks of us that we shoulder each other's burdens and bear each other's pain. It is a love that begins at home, but quickly broadens its reach, for authentic love—*agape*—cannot long exist without another pillar—justice. Once we have known another's pain as well as our own, once we can experience, through a gracious love, the interdependence that truly exists among all of life, we grow increasingly less content with the world as we know it. We become, as Dr. King challenged us to become, creatively maladjusted; we become restless to make right at least our corner of a world in which so much is so cruelly wrong. Love and justice are pillars that in fact support one another, and so we must renew our acquaintance with love and justice.

And our communities must recommit ourselves to peace. We in the liberal religious community have an honorable and historic witness for peace.... But we are far too casual about what it means to make peace with ourselves, with our families, in our homes and in our congregations. We cannot hope to succeed in creating peace on earth if we cannot do it in congregational meetings, or over the dinner table, or in our own hearts. Even as we call out for peace on earth, we are also called to adopt the rest of the phrase from that old hymn: "let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."

Freedom, reason and tolerance, love and justice, hope and peace—these are the seven pillars of Wisdom's House as Unitarian Universalists might build it.

# Family Matters

## All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten

Rev. Robert Fulghum

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandpile 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.

...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."

Source: Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Ballantine Books.



## Family Activity: Used-To-Thinks

One of the ways that children can reflect on how they have grown (and grown in wisdom) is to recall their "used-to-thinks." These are the things that we thought were true when we were younger, but realized later that they were not true. More often than not, the "used-to-think" was our imagination's way of trying to understand how the world worked.

The following "used-to-thinks" were collected by Unitarian Universalist religious educators Anne Fields & Joan Goodwin:

- I used to think that we lived on the **inside** of the world ball, not on the



outside.

- I used to think that when you shut off the TV the program would stop, and then, when you turned it on again, it would begin right where it was when you stopped it.
- I used to think you grew bigger on your birthday.
- I used to think that when people said that Christmas was just around the corner, the people around the corner were having Christmas.

Gather with your children. Explain what "used-to-thinks" are. Share some from your childhood and invite them to share some of their "used-to-thinks" from when they were younger.

## Family Activity: What would you pack?

This a game of pretending to go on a journey and packing a backpack with special things, including some things from our congregation that might help others understand our Unitarian Universalist values. Some things to consider:

- Curiosity, in order to learn everything we can on this journey.
- A wisdom cup to hold the wisdom that we gather along the way.
- Matches and a chalice to light when darkness comes.
- Stories, lots of stories about your life to share with others.
- A blank journal to write your thoughts about all you experience.
- Unitarian Universalist principles to share our religious values.
- A sense of humor and the capacity to laugh.
- A copy of the book, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* by Dr. Seuss.



**Congratulations! Today is your day. You're off to Great Places! You're off and away! Your mountain is waiting. So...get on your way!** Dr. Seuss

*Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

# Our Wisdom Tradition

(Continued from page 1) **Intro to the Theme**  
need wisdom for life. The search for wisdom can begin early, and continue throughout life.

Unitarian Universalist minister Janne Eller-Isaacs, in recalling her childhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, tells a story about Jessie Undersprings, an Osage elder. Excited about the planning of her eighth birthday party with a guest list approaching 40, Janne happened to visit with Jessie who told her about a Native American tribe that didn't celebrate birthdays. Instead, they celebrated the acquisition of wisdom. This happened when everyone in the tribe agreed that one of its members had grown in wisdom. To be sure, there are those wise beyond their years who would be celebrated on a regular basis, and others for whom a celebration would rarely, if ever, occur. This distinction between celebrating the mere passage of time and celebrating moments of transformation that give birth to wisdom is worthy of our consideration.

Wisdom is less about knowing, and more about unknowing. It is the process of walking around something again and



again, even if that thing is your life, and discovering the essence at its core. As is the case in great poetry, the spaces between the words often are as important as the words. It is the ability to see the spaces between things, as well as the web of intricate connections, that leads to wisdom. Isaac Stern, the great concert violinist, was asked why musicians, though they play the notes as written, can sound so different. Stern replied, "But it isn't the notes that are important, it's the intervals between the notes."

Unitarian Universalism is a wisdom tradition. We don't tell you what to believe; rather we support you in your journey toward wisdom. In the end,

wisdom is a quality of mind and a quality of being. What is important is not how much wisdom we have accumulated, but how we are changed as a result of that wisdom. We come to realize that the way we live our lives changes the world while also changing us. With wisdom for life, we realize the power of compassion. With wisdom for life, we understand that compassion is made real through action.

## Wisdom's House

(Continued from page 4) **Faith & Theology**

...But to be truly alive, to be genuinely wise, our congregations must become more than simply refuges, places to hide from pain we cannot bear or conversations we would rather not have. As Unitarian Universalist congregations, we covenant to take seriously the free and responsible search for truth and meaning; to do so means to grant to others the same respect for their faith that we ask

of our own. An engaged Unitarian Universalism, a truly wise Unitarian Universalism, demands that we take our rightful place in the religious marketplace of ideas, that we grow in theological and spiritual literacy, that we ground our dissent from narrow and exclusionary religion in a posture of deep respect for those whose faith differs from our own, and that we open ourselves to the possibilities of grace, whatever the source of that grace should prove to be....

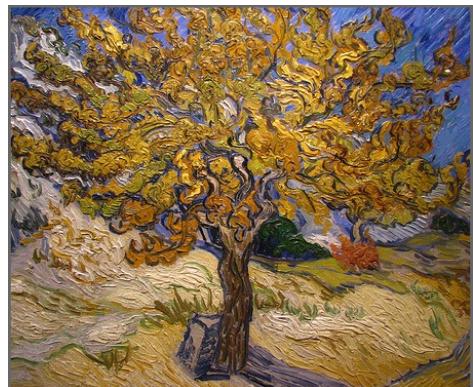
Source: <http://www.stocktonuu.org/sermons/20040125.pdf>

# Athena's Mulberry

**Symbols for Wisdom**  
Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

Wisdom is commonly symbolized by owls (Europe), snakes (Druids, Greeks & Romans), the Shamans' eye (Native Americans, a horizontally oriented diamond within another, with a dot in the center), the Buddha's eyes (Buddhism), and a cruciform symbol from Africa made up of four spirals, and another that looks a bit like a stylized flower. Another is the Mulberry tree, which is associated with the goddess, Athena.

The Mulberry waits until all danger of frost has passed, and then quickly sprouts its buds, which almost appear overnight. Pliny remarked that the tree was prudent and patient, both characteristics of wisdom. The leaves are varied. Some have five lobes while others have one lobe, two lobes, three lobes, or no lobes at all. These trees can live to be over 100 years old and their milky sap is the only thing that silkworms eat, which is why the tree has been cultivated in China for over 4,000 years.



Van Gogh's painting, the *Mulberry Tree*, shows a tree growing in rocky terrain, with startling orange leaves because of the superb autumn weather that year. The tree was in the garden at the Saint Rémy asylum where he lived (May 1889-May 1890). In October 1889, he sent a few paintings to his brother along with a letter in which he wrote, "I'll tell you that we're having some superb autumn days, and that I'm taking advantage of them." Then in December, he sent a few more to his brother in Paris. Of those, he said, the *Mulberry Tree* was his favorite.

## The Value of Mistakes

### Shortage of Wisdom

Jerry Ortiz y Pino

[Wisdom is] one of those slightly old-fashioned words, the type that slip out of style because they sound less punchy than the jargon we start using in their place. In time we forget about using it at all.

And because the words we substitute aren't quite the same, we're made poorer by the substitutions, losing slices of the original meaning with each change.

So wisdom, good ol' *sapientiae* in Latin, hardly ever gets airtime these days. Instead, we talk about "cleverness," "I.Q.," "managerial know-how," or any of 50 not-quite synonyms. None of those really are interchangeable with wisdom, but they get used in its place. Meanwhile, wisdom, the original concept, is forgotten.

[Wisdom is] the ability to make sound choices, good decisions. The best decision. Wisdom is intelligence shaped by experience. Information softened by understanding. And it is in very short supply these days.

Wisdom is not something a person is born with. Intelligence is. Cleverness is. The ability to appear dynamic is. But Wisdom isn't. It only comes from living, from making mistakes—or from listening to others who have made mistakes and learned from them.

If wisdom is in short supply among our leaders, we don't have far to look for the culprits. It started disappearing along about the time we stopped expecting it.

Source: *Notary Public* by Jerry Ortiz y Pino, *Santa Fe Reporter*, October 19, 1994



## Wisdom's Five Minds

### Defining Wisdom

Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland

Peter Webb, a psychologist, specializes in the psychology of wisdom. Webb has developed a five-step process to help in decision-making in order to improve the odds of making the best decision. This "five-minded" dialogue occurs among five considerations that he calls "minds."

1. **The Intentional Mind** attempts to bring clarity to one's motives, preferences and goals with attention to both the short-term and the long-term (i.e., the why question).
2. **The Rational Mind** focuses on data regarding the decision: knowledge, experience, key variables, other people's perspective, consequences, etc. (i.e., the what question).
3. **The Emotional Mind** takes into account intuitive feelings regarding the decision (i.e., does it feel right?).
4. **The Moral Mind** seeks to balance the consequence of the decision with one's core values (e.g., how does this serve the common good?).
5. **The Wise Mind** attempts to bring wisdom to bear on the decision (i.e., what would a wise person do?).

Combining these in thoughtful ways will likely improve decision making and may even result in some wisdom.

Webb writes, "Wisdom is the pragmatic application

of life knowledge, discernment, and compassion for making difficult choices in life. We activate our wisdom resources when we're faced with a dilemma. So everyone has wisdom to a greater or lesser degree."

## Mortal? Everyone!

### A Contribution to Statistics

Wislawa Szymborska

Out of a hundred people those who always know better —fifty-two

doubting every step —nearly all the rest, glad to lend a hand if it doesn't take too long —as high as forty-nine, always good because they can't be otherwise —four, well maybe five,

able to admire without envy —eighteen,

living in constant fear of someone or something —seventy-seven,

capable of happiness —twenty-something tops,

harmless singly, savage in crowds —half at least,

Cruel when forced by circumstances

—better not to know even ballpark figures,

wise after the fact —just a couple more than wise before it,

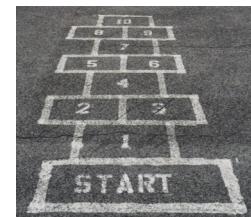
taking only things from life —forty (I wish I were wrong),

hunched in pain, no flashlight in the dark —eighty-three sooner or later,

worthy of compassion —ninety-nine,

mortal —a hundred out of a hundred. Thus far this figure still remains unchanged.

Source: *Map: Collected and Last Poems* by Wislawa Szymborska, 2015. This poem was translated from Polish by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak



# Small Group Discussion Guide

## Theme for Discussion Wisdom

**Preparation prior to Gathering:** (Read this issue of *Explorations* and the questions.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** “But what if I make a mistake?” Will asked. Gilan threw back his head and laughed. ‘A mistake? One mistake? You should be so lucky. You’ll make dozens! I made four or five on my first day alone! Of course you’ll make mistakes. Just don’t make any of them twice. If you do mess things up, don’t try to hide it. Don’t try to rationalize it. Recognize it and admit it and learn from it. We never stop learning, none of us.” John Flanagan

### Chalice Lighting (James Vila Blake)

(In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

**Read the Wisdom Story:** Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page 1.

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

**Sitting In Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

**Reading:** “She wondered when her daughter would realize that for the most part, people weren’t that different. Young and old, male or female, pretty much everyone she knew wanted the same things: The wanted to feel peace in their hearts, they wanted a life without turmoil, they wanted

to be happy. The difference, she thought, was that most young people seemed to think that those things lay somewhere in the future. While most older people believed that they lay in the past.” Nicholas Sparks

## Living the Questions

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. As a child, who was the wisest person you knew? What made you think they were wise? As you consider them now, do they seem as wise? Why or why not?
2. Was wisdom a value that you were raised with? If yes, how? If no, what are some of the ways that we might help children value acquiring wisdom?
3. Wisdom does not seem to be valued by society today? Why? What role can Unitarian Universalist churches play in valuing wisdom and in helping to cultivate it?
4. How have you gained wisdom over the course of your life?
5. Do you continue to seek wisdom? Why? How?
6. What wisdom do you want to share with the generations that follow you?

The facilitator or group members are invited to propose additional questions that they would like to explore.

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

**Extinguishing Chalice** (Elizabeth Selle Jones) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

## Closing Words

Rev. Philip R. Giles

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

# Wise Fools

## Wisdom of Fools

Rev. Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

A wise fool may sound nonsensical, yet ...they abound. The Hodja Nasrudin character is well-loved across Turkey and much of the Islamic world. ...His stories still invite us to pay attention to the wisdom that lies within ourselves.

... Those who speak or act against cultural norms take great risks. No wonder wisdom's truths are delivered by those who adopt a mask of foolishness or are deemed foolish by those who stand to lose from their wisdom.

Source: <http://www.uuathensga.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/1-13-Wisdom-of-Fools-FINAL.pdf>

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