Searching For Wisdom

America's bicentennial summer was a watershed to my understanding of wisdom. Not because I learned where it was, but because I learned where it wasn't. That summer I interned for a weekly newspaper in Detroit Lakes, Minn. The job required scores of interviews, a reporter tasting the lives of people around Becker County. Most of these people were older than I (understandably, as I was 21) contacted for all kinds of reasons. One was a retiring ma and pa resort owner. One was an old saxophone player and entrepreneur. One couple raised vegetables and kids on a truck farm. Another was trying to raise a little kid sick in the heart, literally. One kept a 100-year old firecracker. (Which he decided to light for the bicentennial. It still popped.)

The on-record reasons I interviewed them varied, but I also brought to each interview a an un-stated personal aim. I hoped to find a wise person.

I thought then that wise people must be old people. It seemed that if you had so many more years or decades of experience, you surely would know a lot more about life and what it means. You would understand human motivation, at the least, and maybe even religious truths. I certainly didn't see much insight in people my own age, so insight must therefore come with the years.

The people I interviewed often said things I found interesting and enlightening. But they didn't seem very wise, I'm afraid. By the end of my internship, I was disappointed. It was clear that at the very least, age did not guarantee wisdom.

Of course, that would seem obvious to me today, and probably to you too, but it wasn't so obvious when I was 21. Nevertheless, I determined that apparently while an aged person will not necessary be wise, a young person will necessarily not be wise. Wisdom has got to take a long time to develop. So there still could be some older people out there, somewhere, who are wise. I set out looking.

I looked among my bosses in various jobs. I looked among my colleagues in various settings. I looked among the interviews and obituaries of people great in years. I went to the Old World and looked among English advisors and French landlords and various acquaintances, some of them with pretty impressive credentials.

I set apart certain likely candidates for longer scrutiny: perhaps this person would prove to have the insight; perhaps that person were truly a wise owl.

Inevitably, repeatedly, I was disappointed. A candidate would say something cruel or ignorant. Another would be so work-obsessed he would ignore people needs. Another would sport an obsession for sports or hunting or soaps. Another would offer highly-developed people skills, but nothing below the surface showing true understanding.

It became clear that if youth wasn't wise, age wasn't either. In fact, with some bitter, splenetic old people I've encountered, age seems to have led away from wisdom, not toward it.

So, after some 25 years of looking, I've seen that age doesn't assure anything at all, necessarily-except wrinkles.

But another thought struck me the other day. What really am I looking for? What is wisdom? My answer to that used to be, "I'll know it when I see it." But maybe I won't. In fact, maybe I'm not finding wisdom because I'm not wise enough myself to know what it is.

Sometimes when we want to understand a concept, it's better to start by determining what it is not, rather than what it is. This is a standard of scientific research: we try to prove the "null hypothesis," (that an activity is NOT occurring) wrong, therefor supporting the hypothesis (what IS occurring).

Maybe I can use that approach to find wisdom. I began testing it during a drive on the Interstate. A van passed me plastered with truisms: "Respect Life." Rush Is Right." I thought about Rush and his cruel ridicule of people trying to make our country better. I thought of hate, ridicule and even bombing as a method of helping women through difficult decisions. This does not seem to be wisdom.

On campus was a self-styled preacher haranguing students for their sins. Especially sorority members. I thought about one person setting himself or herself as moral arbiter for the entire country. I don't think a wise person would do that.

A student told me of a professor who sets up a system of rigid rules and punishments in his classes. I thought of teaching through intimidation and fear. This doesn't seem to be a wise way to help people to learn.

I read parts of the Starr Report, and thought about the last six months of activity which led to it. Clinton lied about his sex life. Linda Tripp lied by deception to Monica. Kenneth Starr lied to Americans by turning his the power they gave him in his office into a sexual witch hunt. I don't think a wise person would lie or deceive.

I'm still searching among old people for that wise person. But discovering what in America is clearly not wisdom is proving to be more challenging than I thought. It might take a lifetime. And then I myself will be old, but likely not yet wise.

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