

Rev. Mary Gear

“Being Wise”

A Buddhist story tells of a professor who went to a wise one asking to learn. The professor said, “Please let me be your student. Give me counsel and teach me your wisdom.” The wise one invited the professor to sit for tea to discuss the request. As she poured the tea, it filled the cup and began to spill over the rim of the cup onto the table and then onto the floor, getting all over the professor's shoes. Finally, the professor said, “Teacher, enough! Can't you see that the cup is full? Why do you keep pouring?” The wise one said, “You are like this cup, so full that nothing more can be added. Come back to learn when you are more empty.”

Welcome to the month of March, in which we'll explore the spiritual theme of wisdom.

March is also Women's History Month, so we may go way back in history to ancient times to honor the Goddess of Wisdom, Sophia in the Greek. There is a name for the feminine figure of wisdom in the Hebrew, Latin and Celtic languages, as well as the Greek. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Sophia names the feminine divine. She is often associated with King Solomon and is the personification of wisdom in the Jewish Bible. There are shrines to her around the world. May we turn our awareness to the presence of Sophia this month.

Just like the professor in the Buddhist story, we tend to think of wisdom as something that we acquire, perhaps with schooling and degrees--how many letters can we list after our names or titles can we collect? We think wise people have large book collections or are widely travelled with many adventures under their belt. Or we may think that wisdom can be received from others or is something that we acquire with age.

We live in a consumer culture that tells us that buying something--a product or experience--will make us happy, fulfilled, and wise. And, we live in a culture that values doing, rather than being. We are told to buy more, do

more, read more, watch more. Heaven forbid that there should be Nothing. To. Do. We might be bored! Oh, the horror!

As with many things, there is a nugget of truth in what we are told. We can learn from books and classes and travel and adventures. We can learn as we get older and have more life experiences. But those things aren't enough. Knowledge isn't enough and it isn't wisdom. I especially like this very practical description of the difference between knowledge and wisdom from journalist Miles Kington: Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.

Theologian Matthew Fox describes wisdom this way:

“Wisdom is always taste—in both Latin and Hebrew, the word for wisdom comes from the word for taste—so it's something to taste, not something to theorize about. "Taste and see that God is good", the psalm says; and that's wisdom: tasting life. No one can do it for us. The mystical tradition is very much a Sophia tradition. It is about tasting and trusting experience, before institution or dogma.”

Fox is speaking of the mystics practice of seeking direct connection to something greater, whether you call it God, the universe, the infinite web, divine wisdom, or something else. Whether it is practice of whirling, sitting in silence, prayer, chanting, the intent is the same—emptying oneself and focusing one's attention in order to connect with the mystery, that which is beyond us, that which we cannot know with our minds, but can experience with our hearts.

Wisdom is indeed grounded in our experience. But, in order to glean wisdom from what we take in, whatever that may be—experiences or knowledge—we have to sift through to find the nugget of gold, the kernel of truth, the universal value. We have to simplify all that we know into the essential questions, and perhaps even some tentative answers.

That sifting is the process of reflection and contemplation, in the many ways that is possible. It may be a walk in the woods, writing, meditation, talking with a trusted friend, contemplating an object of beauty, sitting in the back seat of a car, just being. We each may have a different practice, but the process is the same—being with knowledge or experience in such a

way that we understand the meaning for our lives and for our being in the world. That makes wisdom.

Knowing something doesn't mean knowing how to live it. For that we have to act in the world. The process of experience, engagement or action, then reflection, and then re-engagement and more action based on what we learned, that process is called “praxis,” an ancient Greek word used to describe the process of a theory or idea being tested or realized. In spiritual language, it is the process of finding meaning in knowledge in order to understand the universal truth or wisdom to inform our being and doing. Action, reflection, practice. Knowledge, meaning, wisdom.

Most weeks, I have the opportunity to put this into practice as I write sermons. I take my knowledge from reading and study, mix it with my life experience, and I reflect. I sit with the question “What is a universal truth here?” I journal, I walk, I think, I meditate. And, then I write. And then I ponder some more. It's why I write my sermons early in the week—I need time to reflect and deepen my practice. And, with luck, at the end I at least know what I think, what wisdom I have gleaned. Whether or not you see it as wisdom is of course up to you. I simply offer more fodder for your own process of making meaning and wisdom; what you do with it is up to you.

Learning to preach over the years, I've talked to many ministers about their sermon-writing practices, and we all do it a little differently. Some of my colleagues write weeks ahead and some write late on Saturday evening. Part of the process of ministerial formation is learning our own best practice for the art of sermon-writing. After all, isn't knowing ourselves it's own kind of wisdom?

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we tend to be more interested in the questions than the answers. We are a creed-less tradition, which means that we do not tell people what to believe. We do not accept whatever comes off “the intellectual assembly line;” we ask questions, we reflect, we discuss, we act, and we decide for ourselves. We say that everyone has the right to decide their own beliefs, and we accompany each other on our journey to find truth and meaning, knowing that there are multiple truths. And we put our beliefs into action, work for justice that further informs our beliefs. It is a cycle of spiritual growth: action, reflection, practice; knowledge, meaning, wisdom.

This is not an easy path and it requires courage. Over the years, I have known family, friends, co-workers and congregants who, when faced with a hard life experience, are certain that it is God's will or that it was meant to be. While I do believe that the effects of interconnectedness can seem miraculous and that there are many things that I don't understand, I don't believe in a divine force that controls everything. And, I admit that I sometimes envy their certainty. Questions and uncertainty can be much harder to live with. For inspiration, I am reminded of the quote from the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

I believe this is one of the reasons we seek each other out and create community; we like to have help living the questions, support as we face uncertainty, and companions on the journey.

Each Spring the calendar offers us an invitation to empty ourselves to make space for what may come. This is the season of Lent in the Christian calendar. This past week, many celebrated Mardi Gras or carnival on Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday. In this tradition, Mardi Gras is the last day of "fat eating" before the fasting of Lent. Ash Wednesday begins the 40 days of the Lenten season, ending with Maundy Thursday, this year on April 9th. Maundy Thursday honors the last supper, a Seder meal in the Jewish tradition, shared by Jesus with his disciples. Lent leads up to the weekend that includes the grief of Good Friday, the anticipation of Holy Saturday, and the celebration of Easter Sunday.

Lent is characterized by the spiritual practice of fasting, often giving up certain foods and festivities. It is used by Christians to honor the 40 days after his baptism that Jesus fasted in the desert as he prepared for his public ministry. Lent is seen as a time for reflection, self-discipline and sacrifice, mirroring the journey of Jesus on his path to service. "Fasting" these days often involves giving up what may be seen as a vice or excess—smoking, sugar, meat, alcohol, television or screens. One year a friend of mine said that she was giving up anger for Lent. I suggest that it is less about what we give up and more about the process of letting go.

At its center, Lent is about the spiritual practice of making space, emptying out our minds, bodies and spirits, making room for what is yet to come. The wise one, Sophia, would invite us, just as she did the professor, to empty ourselves out so that we may be open to more truth in whatever form the goddess of wisdom may take.

Lent is about inviting uncertainty and living the questions. As we move through the month of March, most of the days in the season of Lent, I invite you to consider these questions:

In this Lenten season, what is taking up space within you that you might need to empty out?

What will help you be courageous in the face of questions and uncertainty?

What new wisdom is Sophia inviting you to discover, uncover, unfold?

We'll hold several minutes of silence, as we face our questions and uncertainty together.

Matthew Fox interview in "Yes" magazine. <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/spiritual-uprising/2005/11/01/holy-impatience-an-interview-with-matthew-fox/>