



## Maybe: Outgrowing our past

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One of the more influential, life-shaping memories I store in my dishevelled filing cabinet of a brain, is reading *King Lear* when I was 16. It may have been my first in-depth encounter with the Bard of Avon. While I can give a basic outline of Shakespeare's tragic play, it is not the story itself that haunts me, but one particular interchange between Lear and his Fool. The Fool tells him, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise."

As an adolescent I was at the apex of my idealistic all-things-are-possible phase and I claimed the Fool's admonition as my life's goal. Alas, for me it is now too late to meet the deadline. Maybe I can achieve it before my last breath. Maybe not.

My tardiness is in part due to lacking an understanding of what I sought, in spite of being reared not by a philosopher king but by a philosopher scientist and his love of Plato and Plato's love of Socrates, whom Plato considered the wisest of all *homo sapiens*, meaning "wise persons". In spite of knowing that philosophy literally means "the love of wisdom", I followed another path, confusing knowledge with wisdom. In my naïveté I thought the more I knew the wiser I would be. At 16, having no sense of irony, I foolishly thought I could be a know-it-all.

Socrates questioned a number of people who claimed to be wise — politicians, generals, poets, craftsmen — and in each case concluded, "I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know." This understanding seems to have once been universal. Confucius believed, "Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's own ignorance." Buddha opined, "A fool who recognises his own ignorance is thereby in fact a wise man." But I think Shakespeare put it most poetically, "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."

The problem with knowledge, while it is often useful in life, is that it is too unreliable to be synonymous with wisdom. It is transitory. While thought true today it is found wanting tomorrow. Knowledge is like tectonic plates drifting and occasionally colliding, reconfiguring a continent's topography. If you were to state with certainty that New Zealand is part of Antarctica, you would have been right 100 to 80 million years ago. Sometimes our knowledge was never right. Old maps show that explorers once thought California was an island. So holding knowledge must be done lightly lest it betray you. Not so wisdom.

There is one other reason knowledge and wisdom are not the same. Wisdom can't be taught, only caught in a net woven from our experiences, our honest self-reflection, and our humility. To witness it requires perspective. Have we acted wisely today? Only tomorrow will tell.

What prompted the above musings? Possibly it was my subconscious processing of the fact that we have just entered my birth month... again. Or they might have been induced by one of my two grandsons turning 16 today, six weeks after my other grandson did. There is another reason. At my age my cup runneth over with memories, coming to mind without either invitation or a polite RSVP. Almost anything can be a touchstone that awakens them.

Memories are both blessings and curses and often problematic. They are the latter because we have reason to question their authenticity. False memories plague us. Sometimes they are the memories others have of us that we take on board as our own. Memories have a tendency to become oral stories and like all oral histories they can be shaped and reshaped in the retelling to suit the purpose of the narrator. As evidence I offer you

the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Mark's was the first to be written. It was a compilation of oral stories. Matthew and Luke both began with Mark but made subtle and not so subtle changes. Sometimes leaving out parts, sometimes changing the time line, and sometimes adding new material. In the end there were three versions of the same story, each fit for the purpose of grinding different theological axes.

Memories bless us by recalling people we loved, adventures we lived, beauty we beheld, little ways we made a difference and so much more that made our lives worth living. Memories are a curse when our past mistakes, choices, actions or inactions embarrass, shame, shrink, and demean us. They remind us of our failures and invite us to live in the shadows or deny a part of us lest others will know our flaws.

Raziq Brown has given some thought to this: "[Some think] we are children who refuse to grow up.

"I think back on my own life, and I know they are wrong.

"Would the boy I was approve of the man I am? No, the boy I was would have thrown himself off the nearest bridge just to save himself from future embarrassment. The adolescent I was would have driven the car to get him to the bridge, and the man I was the year following my father's death would have plied the boy with strong spirits so the fall wouldn't hurt so bad. But I am not the child I was, the teen I was, nor the man I was then.

"I am the man I am now. It is all I can ever be. It's all any of us can be."

That is the ultimate curse of memories: that we too often let our past follies define us now and lay waste to our future. Instead maybe we can outgrow our past. Maybe not. Time will tell if we obtained the means to do so. The means required is wisdom born of aging. Time is wisdom's nursery. We are, of course, all aging no matter how many breaths we have taken. If we were only born yesterday we have already inhaled and exhaled 20,000 times. In my case I will complete 525 million breaths since birth today.

Aging is not always something we welcome but as it cannot be avoided until after our last breath, we need to make our peace with it. The Reverend Richard Gilbert once wrote, "Aging is the ultimate extreme sport. I've risked arrest in protests; I've skied on some rather scary slopes; I've even tried a rock-climbing wall, but nothing quite compares with the ultimate extreme sport of aging. Athletes of the spirit find in the aging process quite enough adventure to challenge and satisfy the soul."

Aging gives us, in the words of William Sullivan, the chance to "outgrow the past but not extinguish it." Aging is an opportunity. Maybe, as long as I keep breathing, I can still achieve that 16-year old's life goal, or maybe not. As King Lear makes abundantly clear, one can grow old and not be wise. It is a tragic outcome, so I continue to strive to beat the clock and achieve wisdom.

I do get glimpses of the possibility of it happening. When I celebrate my connections to others, to nature, the cosmos. When my first thoughts are about the well-being of the whole and not just my part of it. When I can laugh at my foibles, past and present. When love is my guiding star and giving it is as important as receiving it. When an unexpected moment shifts my perspective and I can't unsee it. Like when I understood that wisdom is a way of seeing our lives and the world from a distance. We can gain that under the shower, on a holiday, on a nature tramp, or simply by getting older.

**Meditation / Conversation starter:** Who in your life do you consider wise? Why?