



Why?...Because!

Clay Nelson © 24 April 2022

My Dad was a pretty smart guy. He had a lot of academic degrees after his name and when younger I thought of him as the only Renaissance man I knew. Why? He seemed to know the answer to every question I could throw at him. Later I figured out that he was conning me. When he didn't know the answer, he still gave me one, saying it with enough authority that I bought it hook, line and sinker.

I later suspected his ruse. He got that impish smile of his after being busted and told me he was proud of me. I'd learned that having authority doesn't mean someone has the answer to our questions. Better to trust someone who has no answers but asks lots of questions. This is why he raised me with the Socratic method, a dialogue between teacher and student, instigated by continual probing with questions to foster critical thinking.

There is a downside to this method. I can remember thinking as a high school sophomore, which literally means "wise fool", that a time would come when I would know all the answers. But as I asked lots of questions per my father's guidance, each revealed how much more I didn't know. I realised that if I continued following this method, a time would come when I knew less than nothing.

I found this disheartening. When studying King Lear about the time I thought I knew everything, I was struck by the Fool's admonishment, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise." It is a rebuke I hope never to have directed at me, lest I be the Fool. It became my life's mission to achieve wisdom. Now it may be too late. In spite of knowing lots of things I am old and question if I am yet wise.

The comedian [Louis CK](#) talks about children's questions, for they are prodigies of the Socratic method. He used to think, "When I have a child I will answer all of their questions." Well, do you know what? You can't. It's impossible. If you've ever been a parent, you know that. The child never says, "Oh, thanks. I get it." They don't say that! The questions just keep coming, "Why, why, why?"

Louis CK's daughter asked, "Papa, why can't we go outside?"

"Well, 'cause it's raining."

"Why?"

He searches for an answer. "Well, water's coming out of the sky."

"Why?"

"Because it was in a cloud."

"Why?"

"Well, clouds form ... when there's vapor..."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I don't know any ... more ... things. Those are all the things I know."

"Why?"

"Well, because I didn't pay attention in school. I went to school but I didn't listen in class."

Now, you know what his daughter's going to say: "Why?"

And there's no answer. So eventually the conversation gets really abstract, because at one point he just gives up and says, "Well, because some things are, and some things are not."

"Why?"

Now he's getting really frustrated: "Well, because things that are not, can't be!"

"Why?"

"Because then nothing wouldn't be! You can't have 'nothing isn't'. Everything is."

"Why?"

"Just eat your French fries!"

Parents are relieved when their children get past the "Why?" stage. Because, the truth is, we just can't answer every question. There are more questions than there are answers. I learned that when my three-year old daughter asked

where babies come from? Conventional wisdom said just answer the question in the simplest way possible. Each simple answer led to another question. By the time she finished her interrogation she had the full picture, one qualifying her to be an obstetrician. When finished she asked one more question. Could she have a cookie?

And so one key concept in wisdom is in admitting what you don't know. It was Socrates who told us that, "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." That rang a bell with me and gave me hope.

Children are not the only source of wisdom. Many years ago, I led 12-step groups in hospital rehab units. Many of us, thanks to TV or perhaps our own experience in such a group, know that they always begin with what is called the Serenity Prayer.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things
I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

"What's not as well known is that this is not the full and complete text of the prayer that was written by Lutheran pastor and theologian [Reinhold Niebuhr](#). It continues like this:

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it.

Trusting that You will make all things right
if I surrender to Your will.
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You for ever in the next. Amen.

(The unabridged Serenity Prayer) ... is really three prayers in one. This is, perhaps, what makes it so powerful... It encapsulates the heart and soul of our human condition. The first (verse) is about being in control. As hard as it is to admit it sometimes, we know we are finite and fallible people. Some things are beyond our control. We seek to gain

acceptance for those things. The second (verse) reminds us that not everything is beyond us... We are able to exercise our agency over some of our circumstances. We seek the determination to seize and act upon those opportunities when they arise. And then, in the third (verse), we name yet another central fact in our lives: That, as one of the readings in our UU hymnal by Wayne Arnason states, *“the way is often hard, the path is never clear and the stakes are very high.”* We seek the power of discernment, an “unmuddling” of our minds, the conversion of confusion into clarity. We ask for wisdom.

(Wisdom) ... raises the challenging question of discernment, or our ability to distinguish between things. Between what we can change and what we’re powerless to do. Between right and wrong. Between good and evil, even. When we’re talking about discernment, we’re usually not talking about making a simple either/or choice. About taking a sheet of paper and dividing it down the middle and putting the pros on one side and the cons on the other, then totting them up to see which side wins. Wisdom and discernment are altogether different. Wisdom implies a deeper quality of what I’ll call “knowing.” Knowing not in the intellectual sense of certainty, but in the gut level sense, the heartfelt sense. As Scott Tayler puts it, *“the math of wisdom is often the opposite of what we think. It’s more a game of subtraction than addition. Often, accumulation of knowledge doesn’t get us closer to wisdom; it’s just in the way. There’s a sorting,”* he says, *“a simplifying and stripping away that needs to occur. It’s about unknowing as much as knowing.”* ...

So, where does wisdom come from? How do we gain the wisdom to know the difference? Since the Serenity Prayer is a prayer, maybe that’s a good place to start... (Yet, I confess to struggling with the word prayer.)... Too often we pigeon-hole prayer into that tiny little box of what’s called “intercessory prayer.” Those are the kinds of prayers where we ask God to intervene in our lives so that we can achieve a particular outcome. “Please God,” such a prayer goes, “help get Timmy out of the well,” and “God, help me find a good parking space.” ... (This an even bigger problem when you are a nontheists. To whom am I addressing my prayer?) ... But prayer is so much more than just wishful thinking. I define prayer as an opening up to all that is within, between and beyond us. It’s about making connections with both the known and the unknown. It’s admitting that we’re finite, but when we can “plug in” to that system, when we can experience our unity with it, we’re

opening ourselves up to its wisdom. ... We can access or gain wisdom by allowing ourselves to open up to the rhythm and melody of the Universe, and to be able to actually hear it. ...

Experience can also be a source of wisdom, if we are wise enough to recognise it. I'd like to think that, with age comes wisdom. After all, there has to be some benefit to aging! But experience can be a tough teacher, and sometimes we're not such great learners either. In his book [Callings, Gregg Levoy](#) puts it this way: *"Our powers of discernment — of clarity — are routinely clouded and informed by all manner of impulses, hankerings, emotions, ulterior motives, and intuitions."* We've all been there, haven't we? That place where we keep trying and trying something, hoping for a different result, even long past the point where we know it's not going to happen. ... (That is insanity, not wisdom.) ... Deep down, we know we can only change or control ourselves, our own reactions, our own responses. So, yes, experience ... can be a source of wisdom. But sometimes, maybe even often, even when we wish it to be so, experience does not inevitably lead to wisdom, discernment, or clarity.

"The wisdom to know the difference" — between what we can control and what we can't, between who or how we want to be and who or how we don't, between what we want to do and where we want to go or not — deep and abiding wisdom can be gleaned from a variety of sources. But I believe that ultimately it comes down to a single spiritual practice: listening. Listening to what others who have our best interest at heart are telling us. Listening to what our intuition, our heart, our soul is telling us. And engaging in practices that create channels for the songs of the Universe to penetrate through all the noise of our lives and to reach us in our deepest, in-most places. "

The Wisdom to Know the Difference

Rev. Peter Friedrichs

[Unitarian Universalist Church of Delaware County](#), PA, USA.

I know that listening has taken me to places I did not anticipate or even know to anticipate. Wisdom has taken me on an adventure that has enriched my life and given me joy in the connections it has provided. How can I not tap my toe to the universe's melody?

Meditation / Conversation Starter:

Where have you found wisdom?