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## Wisdom of the Ages

By Jim Selman



Someone mentioned to me a few years ago that “learning to die” was a necessary prerequisite to wisdom. I have spent the better part of my life aspiring to be wise, so it occurred to me there might be something important here. I found the idea of learning to die interesting, and wondered what it might mean. The phrase began to haunt me like the faint melody of a song resounding in my head.

I questioned everything I knew about death and dying. I read books and pondered about how we might learn to be wise and about what it might be that we are supposed to learn “to die”. I began to realize that learning to be wise was not something we can do by studying the writings of great philosophers, artists or self-declared experts in a field—neither will it come to us by simply putting in our time and getting old.

The more I questioned, the less I knew.

Now that I’ve lived inside this inquiry for several years, I’ve come to believe that “learning to die” is exactly the same as “learning to live”. We are dying from the moment of our birth. And we are living until the moment of our death. It is the same process of life from either perspective.

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*“He who would teach men to die would teach them how to live.”*

*—Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, Essays (1580)*

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So what can we glean by looking at life from the perspective of our death (our future) that we can’t see looking forward from the perspective of our birth (our past)? Understanding the answer to this question can open up the possibilities for wisdom, for different ways of being and new action.

### WHY WISDOM?

‘Conventional wisdom’ defines wisdom as the accumulated knowledge and experience necessary for us to make the best decisions we can—essentially, the ability to discern what is true and right. Some people believe wisdom is an innate attribute like character, charisma, leadership or talent—a gift received from God or a part of our DNA that just ‘happened’. I propose that **wisdom is something that can be learned, developed and nurtured** and that learning it is one of the points to living.

Life is about making choices. Wisdom informs our choices and, ultimately, helps us to lead a successful life. This is not to say wisdom *always* leads to success, but it can greatly improve the odds. In the absence of wisdom, the choices we make can end up being either mechanistic reactions to circumstances or moment-by-moment gratification of our whims, wants and



desires. Notions of ethics or morality become irrelevant. Values begin to look like rationalizations and we lack the long-term criteria and a meaningful context for what we choose.

Observing our lives and our choices from the perspective of the future allows us to be different observers in that we can observe what is missing. If we observe our lives from the perspective of the past, we will more than likely see obstacles and problems to be overcome, rather than openings to create something new. Learning to die can give us the perspective we need to have life make sense, to make a difference to others, and to leave this world a bit better than we found it. Wisdom then becomes more than a virtue: it becomes a necessity for self-fulfillment and a possible means to have our last days be the richest and most satisfying of our lives.

### THE FOLLY OF CONTROL

We spend a great deal of our lives trying to bring about change, trying to fix things, wishing that circumstances or the behavior of others would be different than what they are. In other words, we focus a lot of our time on struggling to ‘control’ ourselves, other people or circumstances. Anyone who has procrastination issues or failed resolutions can easily see that our track record for self-control is lacking, and any manager who has tried to get others to behave in specific ways can testify that our track record in controlling others is even worse. While we can do a great deal in any given circumstance, those who consistently get amazing results will assert that their mastery comes from working with the circumstances—surrendering to them and not trying to control them.

Yet we continue to believe we can get what we want *if we have enough control*. The problem is painfully obvious—control doesn’t work most of the time. Less obvious but equally true is the fact that if we believe we need control to get what we want, we will keep on getting what we don’t want (and not getting what we *do* want) so we can continue to have something to control. If we were to look back at our lives from the vantage point of the present, we can see that much, if not most, of the best of what we’ve experienced would have happened without our need to do anything or that we might have achieved the same result by simply asking for what we wanted. Likewise, much of what hasn’t worked is because we attempted to force an outcome.

Most of the time we don’t really have control. Others have the same freedom of choice that we have. The point is to not allow our natural tendency to want to control outcomes (and, therefore, the future) blind us to this reality. If we can live life ‘from the future’, then it has already turned out: we can relax and simply allow our lives to unfold in line with our intentions. This is the point to learning to die—having even more than we expect and celebrating the miraculous nature of living “beyond control”.

Moreover, if wisdom is the ability to discern rightly, to make the best choice, to take actions that can fulfill an intention, then attempting to exercise control (especially when one doesn’t have control and knows that control doesn’t work) is the epitome of folly. The implications of living life in this way will inevitably lead to suffering, disappointment, failure, resentment, regret, fear, and, ultimately, despair. The older we get, the heavier and darker our worlds will become



as our lack of control becomes more and more obvious. Control limits our ability to live life fully, to be fully alive to opportunities and possibilities: it is folly, not wisdom.

So how do we end our complicated struggle to make life and reality conform to our will? The Serenity Prayer, used at the end of most AA meetings, invokes the pursuit of wisdom as an end to suffering:

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*" God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things that I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference".*

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Without some variation of this wisdom, we will, in all likelihood, end our days alone, wondering whether we've wasted our life and what it was really all about.

### THE PROBLEM WITH CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

*Conventional* wisdom is common sense. The problem with common sense is that it is common. It is what we all know or believe about the world, about what works and doesn't work, about what is possible and what is not possible.

But common sense isn't the truth.

### What's the commitment that leads to wisdom?

While a pursuit of or a commitment to truth might lead us to a certain degree of wisdom, *it doesn't mean what we learn is 'the Truth'*.

I reject the idea that there is an ultimate, knowable Truth, something that would make us permanently wise if we could learn it. And since both "learning to die" and "learning to live" are a process (not a destination), we can view wisdom as a kind of 'guidance system', rather than as an accumulation of rules or criteria for 'right' living.

All wisdom, whether conventional or otherwise, has four essential characteristics.

### DISTINGUISHING WISDOM

#### Wisdom is temporal.

Conventional wisdom or common sense only works in a world that doesn't change, a world where 'recipes' generally work and social interpretations and practices evolve over decades or centuries.

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*What we 'knew' to be wise  
in the past may not be  
necessarily be so in  
retrospect—it may not even  
be applicable or relevant today.*

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In corporate life decades ago, it was considered wise to commit yourself to a company, to not question authority, and to trust one's superiors to recognize and acknowledge your contribution over time. Today, our ideas of organization and work have changed. A job is no longer considered a long-term commitment by either the



employer or employee, respectful questioning of authority is a mark of leadership, and each individual can be responsible for creating and managing their own rewards.

In our youth, society tries to imprint us with the wise idea of just saying “No” to alcohol, drugs and other potentially addictive behaviors. Later, the wisdom of our younger years can be seen as a rite of passage to adulthood and a sign of maturity and competence, a choice to either partake of alcohol or other behaviors *in moderation*. Even later, our ‘wise’ choices can be viewed as problems (such as alcoholism) and, as we reflect from the vantage point of middle age, we begin to realize that when behavior or substances get out of control, they are never the problem in and of themselves. It is our ego-based denial or blindness to our own choices that lead us into self-destructive and unsatisfying patterns. Throughout our lives, wisdom about drinking evolves from “Don’t” to “Okay”, then to “Ouch”, and finally “Forgive and forget”—a perspective that ultimately allows us to focus on the ‘chooser’ rather than on particular choices.

**Wisdom is circumstantial.**

The future isn’t what it used to be in the past. Our world is changing rapidly, and it is often the apparently unwise, counter-intuitive choice that is most appropriate.

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*What is wise in one circumstance may be unwise in another.*

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Conventional business wisdom dictated for years that prudent investments should be based on extensive long-range plans for the next three- to five-year period and that good management was almost synonymous with being able to control workers and accurately predict the future. Managers were (and sometimes still are today) held accountable for the accuracy of their forecasts as much as for their results.

Today, few smart companies rely on long-range plans. Most are clear that the need for flexibility and speed require different ways of working with people to achieve commitments. And using past models or ways of operating will not guarantee any success when the game and the playing field change so rapidly.

In our personal life, it might be wise to refrain from quitting a job or investing one’s life savings in a situation where the odds are long or where children or something of irreplaceable value is at risk. Yet, the opposite choice might be wise and even appropriate in a situation where one’s confidence, vision and courage are larger than the circumstances and where one is willing to be responsible for the outcome one way or another.

**Wisdom is actionable.**

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*Wisdom without action is just a ‘good idea’.*

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If we are committed to our choices, then not choosing is also a choice. If we want something to change and yet don’t act, then our future will be more or less an extension or re-creation of the past. Not acting on our wisdom relegates our choices to the overflowing dustbin of ideas that went nowhere, ideas that left us with exactly what we had before we had the ‘wise’ thought.



At the end of the day, the only way to determine whether the action, non-action or the rationale for the choice itself was wise or not will depend on **assessments of the outcome** (either good or bad, right or wrong). Whether we play it safe, minimize risks or make an unreasonable commitment, we will evaluate the ‘wisdom’ of our actions based on our interpretation of what is important to us at that time.

Large organizations with well-established cultures demonstrate this choice of ‘not choosing’ perfectly: ‘decisions’ are often more the result of historical and circumstantial inertia than of any active decision-making process.

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*Our assessments of what is ‘wise’ are based on evaluations of the outcomes of our choices.*

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Judgments about whether a divorce was a wise or unwise decision may be different for each party involved and may change over time. At first, each person having a stake in the decision might agree that the outcome of the divorce, in terms of the health and wellbeing of everyone involved, is “all for the best”. A decade later, they might look back in retrospect and say it was still the best thing to have done, or they might regret their decision and advocate making a different choice if they were given a chance to do it again. In either case, they evaluate the ‘wisdom’ of their choice based on the effect it has had on their lives.

### Wisdom is created by human beings.

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*Wisdom is based on our individual interpretations of the world. We all see things differently and we are creating and sharing ‘new wisdom’ all the time.*

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We all live and die in the same world, a common reality created by our individual and collective actions. But while some may believe in absolute ‘divinely inspired wisdom’, our common measuring stick for wisdom still boils down to our individual assessments. And any assessment we make about any outcome is essentially our own interpretation or understanding, a reflection of the meaning and value we attach to the situation.

This characteristic of wisdom gives us the creative freedom necessary to invent a life, a future and a world of our own choosing. If the practical outcomes of conventional wisdom are not what we want, then we have an opportunity to invent new, ‘unconventional’ wisdom. That is exactly what we need today.

For example, when I began my career, the conventional wisdom in business was that you could not increase quality without increasing cost. It was so basic a notion that to suggest otherwise would be viewed as naïve. With the introduction of the Japanese Total Quality movement into North American society in the 1980s, this new ‘wisdom’ decreed that you not only didn’t need to increase costs, you should expect to decrease costs while increasing quality.

Today, the overwhelming conventional wisdom associated with aging is that it is a period of inevitable physical, sexual, mental, and economic decline. This contemporary view would have older people only make valuable contributions to society in the spiritual arena. Exceptions only tend to prove the rule. Unconventional wisdom might suggest that not only do we not need to



decline, but that it is also possible for us to look forward to getting older on the basis that the best is yet to come.

### UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM AS A SOLUTION

The point to all wisdom, conventional or unconventional, is its use as a basis for choice. What will I do? What should we do? What should you do? These are the questions that call for wisdom. The rationalizations, philosophies or theories we might postulate for whatever answers we come up with are not, in and of themselves, what wisdom is.

#### How do you tell the difference between wisdom and rationalization?

Any choice made based solely on historical experience, common sense or on an expedient-reactive basis will, to some degree, risk being unwise. This is not to say it *will* be unwise, but there is no rational basis for determining whether it is wise or unwise. Until the desired outcome does or does not occur, we have no way of *knowing* what will happen and our experience only tells us sometimes it works out and sometimes it does not. If our notions of wisdom are all based on after-the-fact assessments, then our ‘guidance system’ is entirely based on looking backward—it’s as if we are all driving forward while only looking in our rearview mirror.

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*Wisdom is the capacity to choose rightly in the context of a specific situation, at a particular time, with respect to a desired outcome or commitment.*

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Conventional wisdom acts as a justification for not taking risks, for staying ‘inside the box’ and for making our choices based on preset parameters. From this perspective, it is a control mechanism—not a virtue.

Consider the young professional woman, dedicated to having a successful career, who falls in love with a man from a different cultural background and a different generation. Based on divorce statistics that would lead her to believe the success rate of inter-generational and inter-racial marriages is extremely low, she would not consider marriage as an option *if she makes a rational decision based solely on common sense.*

I have learned from personal experience that ***following unconventional wisdom is the key to a successful life.***

The unconventional wisdom I currently embrace is, first and foremost, based on an ethic of personal responsibility for my own point-of-view and experiences. This means that nothing and no one else is responsible for any choice I make or the consequences of those choices. I believe that responsibility means “response-ability” (the ability to respond). It defines my relationship to my circumstances instead of assessing causality. I can be responsible for anything I say I am responsible for. Anything I am not responsible for, I am a victim of. This unconventional definition empowers me to choose how I relate to whatever I observe and experience to be happening, including my own aging, dying and death.

If I am responsible for my own view and experience of reality, then I do not need to resist, struggle or fight. I can choose to accept life on Life’s terms as I perceive them—without expectation or regret.



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*Is enlightenment the same as wisdom?*

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Learning to die has given me a deep understanding and appreciation that the miracle of life is beyond my control. Whether I attribute my life to God or the Universe, I am profoundly grateful for being alive. I can allow myself to experience the entire bandwidth of feelings and emotions—from ecstasy and excitement to depression and despair—while simultaneously having compassion for myself and others and holding an intention for creating a world that can work for *everyone*.

If I am responsible and have accepted reality as I perceive it, have gratitude and can also generate intention, then it follows that I can create space for others to do the same and also allow them to choose other interpretations or behaviors. I can permit them to be exactly who they are and also who they are not. In this way, I can love them unconditionally, no matter what they choose.

Love, like the truth, doesn't mean anything—it just is. It is everything that we are and everything we can aspire to be. I believe the ultimate wisdom is simply authentic, unconditional love. Any decision or choice based in authentic love will be wise ***no matter what the outcome***, because there are no conditions on love. I will validate any decision I make based on love, regardless of the outcome. Love will always call for choices intended to achieve the highest good—the best outcome—for all concerned.

### **WISDOM: A WAY OF BEING**

This brings me to the conclusion that wisdom is simply a way of being in the world. It is a context for living. It is not knowledge per se, nor a set of rules. It is not an ability or skill. And it is definitely not a thing we can *acquire* or even *measure*.

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*We can 'master' wisdom.*

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All mastery is mastery of self. In this context, mastery is the capacity to create something and commit in the moment, not to apply some recipe, idea or approach.

When it comes to wisdom, anyone can be wise and, from one perspective, everyone is wise. When we know who we are and that our essential nature is Love, we do not need to fear or resist dying any more than we need to resist living. We can create authentic choices based in love and commit to them in the moment. We can 'be wise'. We may sometimes forget or find ourselves blind to our essential nature, and then make choices that limit us or support the persistence of our struggle. But once we are aware, we cannot lose our awareness. There is no going back: we will always remember that we have the ability to create freely and to choose in the moment.

Learning to die is learning to 'come from the future', and that makes us be different observers. Mastery is making the choices that allow one to fulfill one's intention in a particular arena. If we can come from the future with the realization that it's all worked out, that we all die, and that in each moment everything is complete and perfect, then there is nothing to fear. We have



total freedom—to let things and people ‘be’ without controlling them, to correct mistakes, and to live the rest of our lives as a total expression of who we are.

Whatever is after death—if anything—is a subject for theologians and philosophers. For those of us who aspire to ‘be wise’, it is enough to choose to live each moment to the fullest and to make our decisions and choices with love and the confidence that whatever the future holds, we are sufficient to respond, to create meaning and value, and to live the consequences of our choices no matter what.

#### AFTER WORDS

I am who I say I am. That is what I say. I don’t know if it is ‘the Truth’, but I believe it to be wise. If I have gained wisdom in my life, I pray it is because I have lived a life committed to love and appreciation for others and the intention to help others be more than they think they are. When I am troubled or conflicted, I say the Serenity Prayer.



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