

Is it wise to neglect the pursuit of wisdom?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

A reader sent me a few questions that sounded both old and new. Responding to a column probing the search for truth, the reader asked: “What is wisdom? How do you define wisdom? How is it attained—the scientific method?” It would be unwise to ignore such sapient questions.

She can be elusive. It can be difficult to find her. Is she purposely hiding, or does she smile—with a shake of her ancient head—when we walk right by? I’m anthropomorphizing here, placing human, feminine qualities on the subject, but simply taking a cue and a clue from the Book of Proverbs. “Wisdom cries out in the street, in the squares she raises her voice ... ‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?’” (1:20-22). The theology comes later (“the Lord gives wisdom,” “the Lord by wisdom founded the earth,” etc.), yet I would suggest the pursuit of wisdom is different than seeking God (if one says Woman-Wisdom is divine or an attribute of God, this would admit the feminine part of God’s nature. Not exactly traditional church teaching).

The writer of Proverbs seems to turn wisdom over and over in his hands, using various terms to describe this intangible object: “understanding,” “insight,” a “path” and a living thing. In natural terms: “She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy” (3:18).

Wisdom is often described as a pursuit, yet here in Proverbs wisdom becomes the proverbial pursuer. Which one is it? It might be both. We seek, while something seeks us. Personally I wouldn’t say that’s divine or a deity, but like a curious creature—bird or cat or something—wisdom is moving around, lurking, waiting for us to notice, discover and seize. Wisdom is a pursuit of clear-headed discernment of what is true; at the same time it’s a practice, a reasonable and relentless effort to engage our amazing faculty of reason.

Having quoted from Proverbs, I wouldn’t recommend we gain insights exclusively from this one ancient text. Written as instructions by one parent for one child, composed for one community in one period of history, it can’t apply to all people in all places at all times. However, in the honest and balanced search for wisdom and serious intent to practice wise living, the Book of Proverbs can certainly be helpful as one source along the journey.

I think framing the pursuit as a journey, an adventure of exploration, is wise in and of itself.

A journey of doubting without fear of consequences, of what we may find “out there” (or “up here,” in our head). Not a destination. No one ever “arrives” at the State of Wisdom, achieving full and complete wisdom. That would cheapen the value of the search. Those comics that show a “wise man” (usually male) sitting on a mountain top where a seeker has to climb up high to receive wisdom, offer a false sense of “attainment.” Even in Buddhist philosophy, “reaching Enlightenment,” doesn’t end the journey or complete the path. That would make the religious path a kind of dead end, a final destination. The purpose of being a “follower of a path” is to see oneself as a pilgrim on perpetual pilgrimage. This doesn’t mean there are no

“rest stops” along the way, moments when a stage of life transitions to another. But I don’t see the Way OF Wisdom as necessarily the Way TO Wisdom. If the goal is to nail a Certificate of Wisdom on the wall, a graduate degree asserting you are now a verified wise person, I think this reveals true wisdom was never seriously pursued.

I’ve been thinking more about the revolution in artificial intelligence. With the rapid advancements in technology, vastly increasing our ability to communicate information and knowledge, what happens to wisdom? Can AI provide that? Doubtful. Yet, here again we have to wonder if computing machines can actually “pursue” wisdom. I wouldn’t count on that. Perhaps it can present diverse options for paths to wisdom and predict potential outcomes, but I would argue wisdom is one of those uniquely human traits that machines can mimic but can never replace humanity’s quest for the wise, let alone the true and good.

Returning to the reader’s inquiry: is wisdom attained via the scientific method? Well, I don’t see any better way to propel the pursuit but through interrogating our world, testing viewpoints and listening to divergent opinions, exploring options. How else to gain practical knowledge to live by? This approach is not particularly encouraged by most religious traditions, which may be another reason to wisely question whether a religion is truly a “wisdom tradition.”

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