

## **First Unitarian**

*A Unitarian Universalist Congregation*

*Meeting in Albuquerque, Carlsbad, East Mountains, and Socorro, New Mexico*

# **Growing Wisdom**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Ronald A. Hersom  
on February 7, 2010**

On behalf of all the staff here at First Unitarian Church, I want to thank you for your generosity in the special collection last week where we received over \$9,200 in monies and pledges. As a result we will be able to restore 70 percent of the hardest budget cuts within our staff. Thank you. Your generosity is deeply appreciated. And if by chance you did not get the opportunity last week to contribute to this special collection, information and envelopes are available for you at the Welcome Table. Once again, thank you for your ongoing commitment and support of First Unitarian Church.

## **Growing Wisdom**

Plato, the classical Greek philosopher and founder of the first institution of higher learning in Western civilization, described his myth about the journey of the soul. He commented that before the body encounters the soul, just before it enters this earthly existence, the body is dipped into the River of Forgetfulness. I am not sure if he is inferring that the knowledge we grow into is but a remembering of what was given to us at birth, or that the wisdom we grow into comes from within the knowing of who we are.

In either case, Plato's myth seems consistent with Samuel Johnson, eighteenth-century English author and moralist, who wrote that memory is the mother of all wisdom.

I am not sure about you, but I am comforted by these ideas. Do you have moments of knowing—an awareness of something coming to you, an understanding that you cannot explain why or how you knew it? It could have been a hunch or intuition. Have you ever had that experience? Or have you experienced trying to remember something, like the name of a person, and you cannot do it. And the harder you try, the more frustrated you get. Then after a while, relaxed and without cause, all of a sudden the name pops into your mind. And usually with a sigh of relief, we laugh about it.

There are knowings or deep understandings within us—wisdom you might call it—that, once tapped, can give us opening to an even deeper understanding of who we are.

So what is wisdom, and where do we find it? How do we grow it, expand it? Webster tells us that wisdom can be seen as the ability to optimally apply perceptions and knowledge so as to produce the desired results—to apply perceptions and knowledge so as to produce the desired results.

These perceptions could be ideas or facts, things we have taken into ourselves or even situations or events that happen in our lives. It could be like our vault of information or our own internal hard drive. The information we gather throughout our living.

Rachel Carson, founder of the contemporary environmental movement, sees the information that we gather during our lives this way. She says that if facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.

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Where have you found wisdom or an understanding? Have you ever felt something with your instinct that you know is right, either the right thing to do or the right thing to say in a specific moment? Have you ever thought after doing or saying something, *Where did that come from?* And think, *How did I know that?* Much of what we know comes from within the essence or instinct of who we are. What has been in us all along. Or in the terms of Plato, knowledge lost to that dip in the River of Forgetfulness.

The twentieth-century German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer has his thoughts about wisdom as well. He writes: To understand reality is not the same as to know about outward events. It is to perceive the essential nature of things. The best-informed man is not necessarily the wisest. Indeed there is a danger that precisely in the multiplicity of his knowledge, he will lose sight of what is essential.

So how do we uncover, unearth, or open up into that sense of self or wisdom that is in us? I am not talking about book learning, schooling education or degree formation in its strictest sense. I am talking about a wisdom that expands us, gives us awarenesses and insights beyond what we think we know. It is a knowing that gives us the means to handle a difficult situation with a friend or family member, or gives us the courage to make a choice whose specific outcome we may not know, but whose result seems to blossom into the perfect response. Plato alluded to our knowing coming from our living memory. It seems to take gathering experiences in life and using our emotional understanding or instinct or spiritual dimension to grow as well.

I want to look at our lives as spiritual beings in talking about wisdom. What can we do to help us in our spiritual journey of growing wisdom? The nourishment of our soul—our essential self—is something we do throughout our entire life. It leads us to better understanding of who we are in this world. The journey in our inner life requires both our attention and our intention. It requires reflection on our situations, ideas, and actions. Sage Bennet speaks to the many practices that can help us cultivate, nourish, and deepen the reflection experience in deepening our inner life.

Sage Bennet says it very simply; she writes that there are four components to living wisely: eating well, walking, resting, and nourishing the soul.<sup>1</sup> I think three of these things are just good common sense in living a life, regardless if we want to be wise. The first three items—eating well, walking, and resting—are essential parts of our personal self-care that we need. Self-care creates a space in each of us that allows our presence to be receptive, open to all that comes at us in life. We can never control what heads our way in life. We may never know what adventures and trials may spring into our life day by day. What we can do is have presence that responds to them. I think that all four items can add to our overall capacity to be wise, but one of them is critical to the wisdom walk, to growing wisdom in our lives. The first three—eating well, walking, and resting—cultivate and prepare the soil in your garden. Nourishing the soul is where we grow and harvest the fruit of our wisdom. The nourishing of our soul requires our reflection, a looking at who we are, what has happened in our lives, and what we have learned. There are some tools that can help this reflection process to nourish our soul and deepen our inner life.

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<sup>1</sup> Sage Bennet, *Wisdom Walk*, New World Library, Novato, CA, pg 239.

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In writing about her soul experience that we heard in our reading, Sage Bennet writes: The dark night of the soul is a time when our familiar structures of life crumble—in [her] case, a conceptual framework of success that included a busy lifestyle and productive work life. After the death of the old structures in the dark-night experience, we have to rely more and more on the spiritual, our true foundation. We turn to Spirit, God, the Beloved, the One—[or] whatever we want to call it—because that is all we have left.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past two years, I have taught a class about practices that help us as Unitarian Universalists deepen our spiritual life. This year Carmen is teaching the class with me. And there are many parallels between the list of practices that Sage Bennet identifies and this UU class.

There are three specific spiritual activities we can do in deepening our inner journey and growing our wisdom:

- Develop a personal spiritual journey
- Develop a friendship or partnership with another spiritual seeker
- Participate in and attend communal worship

The first activity is our personal spiritual journey. This journey to our inner being uses spiritual practices that can help us in this reflective process. Meditation or prayer is a useful tool for reflection. Whether it is in the stillness of the morning air as we walk our neighborhood, or a peacefulness of our quiet space where we sit and just listen to the still small voice deep within. Meditation is a tool to help us reflect on who we are and where we are going. It can give us moments to reflect on our memory and what is going on right now.

Sometimes in this quiet space, we can do another form of spiritual practice—journaling. We can write down the flow of ideas in those moments. Insights, thoughts, and feelings can capture the essence of what is being revealed at those times. These connections help us deepen our spiritual journey.

A second tool for reflection is a spiritual partnership or friendship where deep listening happens. This relationship is between peers. And there is an intention in the relationship, a covenant that identifies how you come together and share time. It is not therapy. It is active listening and reflection one to another. This relationship also can deepen each of your spiritual journeys. It is part of growing our wisdom.

And the third area is communal worship, much like we are doing right now. There is a freedom or liberation in our communal worship that allows and honors your own experience. A worship experience not based upon what is a doctrine but rather upon what you accept allows an opening within you. You are not basing your faith or understandings upon a teacher, a mentor, or another belief system. It is based upon who and what you accept, and in this there is liberation and the potential for growing wisdom. In the words of Sophocles, the Greek dramatist, wisdom is the supreme part of happiness. Living our spiritual lives based upon who we are and what we know as truth fulfills us with a joy of living.

Our spiritual practice and our reflections can foster a deeper understanding of who we are. It nurtures our emotional sense of self. It helps in growing our wisdom.

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<sup>2</sup> Sage Bennet, *Wisdom Walk*, New World Library, Novato, CA, pg xxi.

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As I close my sermon, I want to share with you the words from a song that opened my heart and mind to growing wisdom. These lyrics came to me as I was sharing and talking with friends about what is wisdom. Would you please join me in the spirit of reflection, meditation, and prayer.

### **Growing Wisdom**

Growing wisdom, means freedom in all you do  
Growing wisdom, challenges your truth  
Growing wisdom, can happen every day  
Just open up your mind, and your heart will lead the way.

The lessons of our youth, feelings from the past  
Impression in our minds, the ones that last and last  
Just bring them all together and give them what you know  
And you will soon start to have your wisdom grow.

Take your dreams for the future for they lead us on and on  
To reach for the promise, create a brand new dawn  
Bring your future to the present and add the past you know  
And you will see your wisdom blossom and grow.

Growing wisdom, means freedom in all you do  
Growing wisdom, challenges your truth  
Growing wisdom, can happen every day  
Just open up your mind  
Come on open up your soul  
Just let yourself be whole  
And your heart will lead the way.

Ron Hersom, May 1992

Amen.