

## How to be Wise

I'll tell you how it is. I'm wise. I'm someone who gave up a regular income to play online poker. But that's not when I realised I was wise. That epiphany arrived on my last day of work. Nothing said "You're a pillar of wisdom" as receiving leaving gifts of: a cigar, a Zippo, wine, and seventies-era pornographic playing cards.

Therefore, please accept my well-qualified guiding hand as I flag the signposts on your pathway to wisdom. Think of me as the ghost of your clueless future and allow me to shed light on darkness.

The first step to wisdom is to stop denying you have a problem. Maybe you don't have a problem. But, then again, how many people do you know who don't? The tapestry of life is knitted with problems. Solve one and another usually unravels within a few days, niggling away at your happiness.

To clarify, I'm not referring to life-threatening problems. I'm guessing, if you're lucky enough to be reading this, you know where you are sleeping tonight. I'm referring to lifestyle-threatening problems.

Typically, these involve issues of love, community, sex and status. Over time, they can erode your quality of life. They sabotage your behaviour in certain situations, particularly when you're unsettled. They can make you aware that your life could do with fine-tuning.

You might detect a pattern of behaviour that can leave you emotionally bruised. At this stage you might seek out the wisdom of Google. Let's say you type, "Why am I..." and complete the question with your problem. You read stories from a range of people experiencing the same issue. You're heartened. You feel less alone.

However, the next time you are in the trigger situation the issue recurs. You know others battled through your issue but that isn't enough. You realise you need more. The question hasn't gone away.

So, inspired by the personal stories, you'll probably sense the second step to wisdom: the need to do some psychological forensics. Think about events that might be important to the origin of the problem. Here's a smattering of key moments from my life that have caused later difficulties: ball-bearings thrown at the face of my sister;<sup>1</sup> a bout of anxiety attacks

---

<sup>1</sup> I was seven and had lost a game of Crossfire

provoked by walking over bridges; attending a fancy-dress party as Obi-Wan Kenobi<sup>2</sup> wearing a costume that incorporated a fluorescent tube<sup>3</sup> and a dishcloth<sup>4</sup>.

When you stir up the relevant sediment from your past, you might feel worse. That doesn't last long, and you should gain insight. However, after a while, you will discover the issue with excessive introspection. The act of labelling oneself with a self-diagnosis often does more harm than good.

The thought process that began with a specific problem can end up spawning unfounded, additional issues. These can prevent you from reaching the next step to wisdom. You might be akin to a person who fends off loneliness by maintaining a comprehensive population of unfounded worries to feel less alone as they work as highly effective cock-blockers. That's a reason some people might improve their life by dropping introspection and firing themselves into life. Plenty of people who, after years of listening to neurotics whine about their problems, would happily light the cannon.

However, you'll probably stop the inner journey before you hear the fuse crackle. You'll realise that you won't find more wisdom in your navel. Therefore, the third step to wisdom is the realisation you would benefit from more connections to others. However, partly because you've been introspective, you might meet the kind of people that exhibit the negative consequences of self-absorption.

Narcissists have mastered the art of navel-gazing and see everything as a virgin canvas begging for their stroke. Approach them with your problem and you'll discover they cannot subordinate themselves to listen. Imagine describing a domestic mechanical problem to a person employed to repair it. Before you've finished talking, they'll say "Wow, that reminds me...." and dash off to fix their dryer. You are left with a stinging sense of invalidation and unaired laundry.

Over exposure to narcissists might tempt you to recall that the first part of the body formed in the womb is the arsehole. Narcissists can suffer from arrested development. That might explain why they are from the hand-up-

---

<sup>2</sup> I told you I was wise

<sup>3</sup> The lightsaber

<sup>4</sup> As a beard

the-ass school of manipulation. They will try to work you like you're some kind of novelty oven-glove. They don't understand personal boundaries.

Wisdom doesn't echo from the mouths of narcissists because their approach to others is devoid of empathy. It is important to meet narcissists because you can learn something about wisdom from those that are unlikely to possess it. They highlight the danger of taking the wrong path.

After ~~talking~~<sup>5</sup> listening to a narcissist, you might have a traumatised sense of identity. You might be gagging for your friends.<sup>6</sup> They could have an answer to your problem, too.

However, when a group gets together, there will be a sizing up and comparison of lifestyles. Based on, say, income, cheekbones and volume of voice, someone will emerge as dominant. That does not mean they are qualified to offer insight. It's akin to getting lifestyle advice from silverback gorillas who establish their position by biting and roaring.

An interesting shortcut to either absorbing or discounting the friend's words is to imagine a society run by that person. Try it. It can be entertaining. You'll imagine a range of societies including, say, Afghanistan, Singapore and Goofball Island. Sometimes when you do this exercise, you will imagine a happily inert community. Exercise caution. Some people project Iceland to disguise Syria.

Another danger of asking friends is that you meet a version of Hindsight Lad, a Marvel hero who turns up after catastrophic events. Hindsight Lad describes how things would've been better had they been done his way to people on the scorched earth mopping up loved ones.

So, here's the fourth step to wisdom: the realisation that friends sometimes have an agenda that can jeopardise their advice. Groupthink rarely produces wisdom. Hindsight Lad wants you to become Circumspection Man: he wants you to be incapable of moving out of your comfort zone for the fear of disastrous consequences.

Most minor emotional problems will demand a few steps away from entrenched routine. That might tempt you to seek outside help. You don't think you need the professional touch. However, you might find it

---

<sup>5</sup> Sorry. Easy joke.

<sup>6</sup> Assuming they're not narcissists

appealing to listen to someone who has a YouTube channel or a publisher.<sup>7</sup>

It is understandable. There can be a yearning to outsource your life, to protect your backside and avoid responsibility. That yearning can birth a massage of services, organisations, and individuals, all happy to exploit it. It is why some people will seek life-changing wisdom by going to a tent on a pier and sitting with someone who wears a purple mu-mu<sup>8</sup>.

The ability to translate “woo” into moolah is easily upscaled. The charlatans ditch the mu-mu, season their oration skills with abstract nouns and pay for seizure-inducing white teeth. They recognise that enrichment = the halo effect + the placebo effect.

Most of us realise that we are vulnerable to exploitation before we are dazzled by dentistry and buy into homoeopathy. However, casting light upon bullshit can be depressing but it offers the fifth step to wisdom: the realisation that the Wizard of Oz is a hustler from Nebraska. To worship a false messiah can arrest your journey to wisdom. And here I hold up my hands: I can't tell you how to be wise. No-one can.

At this point you might despair. Your experiences might taint your view of humanity. You are no closer to understanding your problems despite consulting gurus and Google. But you needn't despair. The corruptibility of the gurus exposes their humanity. And to acknowledge the complexity of humanity is to walk towards wisdom.

Here's why: in India, if you type into Google, “My husband wants me to...” the first suggestion is “breastfeed him”. (That's some complexity of humanity right there.) And here we glimpse the sixth step to wisdom by speculating on the reasons.

Some responses found by Google could offer a pseudo-Freudian interpretation. Others might suggest there's a perpetual infant state within certain individuals in a nation that has a history of being dominated. And a large proportion of the answers will be “you've probably got great tits!”

Maybe all or none contain elements of the truth. However, they do illustrate human complexity. It ranges from corruptibility to “great tits!”

That's the beauty of curiosity and mixing with a variety of people: you flourish with a life-affirming sense of connection. By acknowledging the

---

<sup>7</sup> Or someone who has the ego to tell readers, ‘How to be Wise’

<sup>8</sup> cf. Fluorescent tube and dishcloth

flaws of humanity, you realise that, “The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews.”<sup>9</sup> That can help you see the light.

So, here's my last suggestion: imagine yourself in a small, dark room. There appears to be only one source of light, behind a tiny, barred square. You grip the bars trying to see a glimpse of the sun. With a certain exertion, a distinct angle of the head, you are sometimes blessed with the sun's caress. That, for a few seconds, transforms your experience. It is a kiss of hope. You decide you cannot miss the next orbit.

So, you cling to the bars. You contort your body. You twist your neck. The chance of light is all. To miss a moment would pitch you into despair. You could not live with yourself if you missed the light. You stay at the bars. You don't face the darkness of the rest of the cell. You never realise that the door at the opposite end, through the darkness, is open.

You're not in a cell.

You are free.

It's now up to you to face the darkness.

---

<sup>9</sup> W. H. Auden - Death's Echo