

**Wisdom**  
**By**  
**Daniel E. White November 4, 2024**

God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.

Most of us are familiar with these words that begin the Serenity Prayer, part of the Alcoholics Anonymous program. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr is generally credited with penning the prayer in the 1930s, but the gist of the message has been around for much longer.

The challenge inherent in Niebuhr's words is understanding what constitutes wisdom.

A recent essay by David Brooks, originally published in *The Atlantic*, rekindled my interest in thinking about that challenge. Brooks' article examined "the secrets of late bloomers," why and how some people live most of their lives before doing that thing that makes their lives memorable well after their deaths. He identified several "traits that tend to distinguish late bloomers from early bloomers." Among those traits is wisdom.

Brooks wrote: "Wisdom is a complicated trait. It starts with pattern recognition—using experience to understand what is really going on. But the trait we call wisdom is more than just pattern recognition; it's the ability to see things from multiple points of view, the ability to aggregate perspectives and rest in the tensions between them."

At some point in the evolution of our species, a subset of the species determined differences between themselves and another subset of the species. For whatever reason, the subsets chose to identify "us" and "them," highlighting the differences and gradually coming to view the way they lived and thought and acted superior to the way the others did.

Humankind has been living with the fallout of that point in time ever since.

Applying Brooks' thinking, there was no wisdom evident in that moment. There was no effort to "see things from multiple points of view," no level of comfort living in "the tensions between" multiple perspectives. It is fair to ask whether or not we as a species have improved on this measure of wisdom.

At some point in the evolution of our species, humans yearned to figure out their origins. Out of these yearnings came creation stories and from creation stories came beliefs about one's duty to the creator and laws defining right ways to think and act.

Likewise, once their number increased, those early ancestors of ours decided to organize their societies, create rules and regulations, establish norms for appropriate behavior; in short, they created governance. Most chose to identify leaders. Often, the strongest person was chosen, especially if the group sensed that the physical defense of what they viewed as theirs was important. Sometimes there were physical contests for power; other times there were agreements that offspring of a certain clan were somehow ordained to be leaders.

There is nothing inherently wrong about creation stories and the beliefs that followed or about organizing a community with a leader designated. But, by definition, each action added to ways to differentiate between "us" and "them." Still, no harm done, unless an "us" decided that their ways were the only ways. The next step—forcing the "other" to adopt your ways or face consequences—followed easily.

History is replete with instances where conflicts over religion and contests for power have led to wars, repression, discrimination, etc.

But wait. Aren't there inescapable differences between people? Isn't this one of those "things we cannot change" that just has to be accepted? Doesn't Brooks acknowledge that there are differences in defining wisdom?

At Webb School, senior level students served as mentors to new freshmen for the first days of orientation. We faculty sat in with the groups of students, usually numbering eight, but the seniors ran the show.

Jimmy was the senior, a Korean from Koreatown in Los Angeles, from a family that owned a small store and mostly spoke Korean at home. He had come to Webb through a program called A Better Chance that identified talented kids from communities not traditionally served by independent boarding schools. Schools then provided financial aid for ABC kids to attend.

Jimmy began the session by asking each boy to say where he was from and what led him to apply to Webb. Martin was a black kid from South Central Los Angeles. His parents both worked at steady but low-paying jobs. Martin knew that others in this circle came from affluence, but in introducing himself, he was not shy about explaining the circumstances of his home life.

Martin then explained that he had learned about Webb and applied because of a program called A Better Chance."

Jimmy interrupted. "Oh my gosh, Martin. You're just like me."

Jimmy changed the scenario dramatically. He did not in any way minimize difference, but he found the common ground between himself and a kid from a tough part of town.

Rebekah Brandes, writing in *Nice News* August 31, 2024, reported results from a University of Waterloo research study that asked, "what makes someone wise?" The study included men and women from eleven different countries, ranging from China to South Africa to Peru. Two themes were common among all questioned: Thinking logically and reflectively and taking others' thoughts and feelings into consideration.

Maybe differences aren't the problem.

People of a certain age, is there a pattern here?

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