

Whence Wisdom?

by G. Murphy Donovan (October 2016)



“When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” – Yogi Berra

I had dinner the other day with a family that was about to launch their son towards college. As the evening drew to a close, their first born asked me if I had any words of wisdom about school to share as he left home for the first time.

Wisdom, thought I? Now there’s an asset in short supply today, if not words, then surely the quality of wisdom. I believe I coughed up a few clichés, something about maturity being a journey “from me to thee.”

The written word is often the corrected and amended version of the spoken. A few days later, I sent the aspiring scholar what follows below, a personal appraisal of schools, education, and the pursuit of wisdom.

The Shithouse Mouse

Wisdom in general has several definitions and a host of synonyms. My favorites are lore, common sense, and judgment; another gaggle of values in short supply

these days. Indeed, wisdom, like virtue, might best be known in breach these days.



Philosophers approach the lore of wisdom obliquely. Confucius defines the “paths” to wisdom as reflection, imitation, and experience, clearly favoring the first two over the last. The Confucian paths are notable because they all require action on the part of the seeker.

Experience, of course, is just the school of hard knocks. A Confucian, like the Buddhist, sees reflection and imitation as the predicates to avoiding the black and blue of experience.

Reflection, some call it meditation, is a difficult road for the autistic gamer to travel. Catholics had a meditative tradition at one time, “examination of conscience” they called it. This was before the advent of reality TV, digital porn, legal pot, emoticons, and Pokémon. Withal, the ability to reflect, or be introspective, is still a milestone of true maturity.

If you are a habitual stoner, you are very apt to confuse paranoia with reflection, laughter with happiness.

Alas, adulthood might not necessarily be a destination resort anymore; for students, pedagogues, or the public square.

Unlike cyber-culture conformity in the West, "imitation" is not slavish conformity in Confucian or Buddhist traditions. Imitation in eastern religious tradition is discipline and restraint; the need to follow before one can lead. Following, as any military drill instructor knows, is like good memory, an asset not an end.

The Greeks used to say that "memory was scribe to the soul." Indeed! Learning vicariously from good example has prophylactic properties too; the wall, at times, between risky and disastrous.

At a minimum, memory is often the antidote to folly.

The Buddhist dares to define wisdom as "that which directs knowledge toward good—toward the creation of value." The key words are good and value; one implies judgment and the other signifies worth. Neither says anything about Louis Vuitton or Jimmy Choo.

There is celestial purpose in imitation, listening, minding your manners, and hearing your elders; just as there is purpose to brushing your teeth daily and changing your knickers weekly. Good habits are, among other things, the keys to procreation, finding a comely squeeze or a suitable mate.

Women are attracted to men who bathe, cook, belch discretely, tie their own shoes, do laundry, and think without a smart phone or Google.

The Judeo/Christian take on wisdom is Solomonic. You might recall that Solomon was the wisest of kings. At least that's what the Bible says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is insight."
(Proverbs 9:10)

The key words here are fear, knowledge, and insight; another trio of tools in the kit of life.



Think of fear as restraint, knowledge as ammunition, and insight as marksmanship; none of which are very useful without the others. Together, they represent faith.

Allegorically, faith is the no-lose hedge that we might not be the sharpest tool in the drawer; we might not be the apex of evolution. Indeed, if you believe in the narrows of science or the cloister of atheism, you could conclude that the human race, like passenger pigeons, might just be another evolutionary dead end.

Bummer!

Blaise Pascal called faith a wager, a no-lose hedge. If there is no final reckoning, you lose nothing and still set a good example. On the other hand, the scoundrel risks everything, here and There.

Faith and humility are usually ship mates in any case.

Alas, folks have faith, not because we need Gods, but because the Gods need us. Without sheep, whence shepherds?

Faith is also a near universal appreciation of the wisdom of crowds, again

humility, a declaration that life is a team sport (see Hugo Grotius). It's no accident that people of faith also believe in their fellow man, as absurd as that may seem for those who tweet compulsively, watch reality television, or read the *Washington Post*.

Nonetheless, tribes are essential. Tribes are our true diversity.

The cardinal virtues of Judeo/Christian tribes are faith, hope, and charity. Putting faith in the fast lane is no accident. Those without belief, of some sort, are destined to despair.

Faith is also the handmaiden of personal and collective stability – or sanity if you insist.

Belief is the most human of values. We despair when people fail us. We despair when government fails us. And we despair when ideology fails. Nonetheless, we are still believers in people and ideas.

Faith is its own reward.

Even secular rationalists and atheists believe in God; albeit, the gods of reason. Science, in its purist form, is frequently the worship of data over judgment. Nuclear weapons, video games, porn, and PBS are probative here.

Science is, too often, a simpleminded question of what can be done, not the more vexing question what should be done. You could do worse than think of science as “how” and think of ethics as “why”, the minefield between necessary and sufficient.

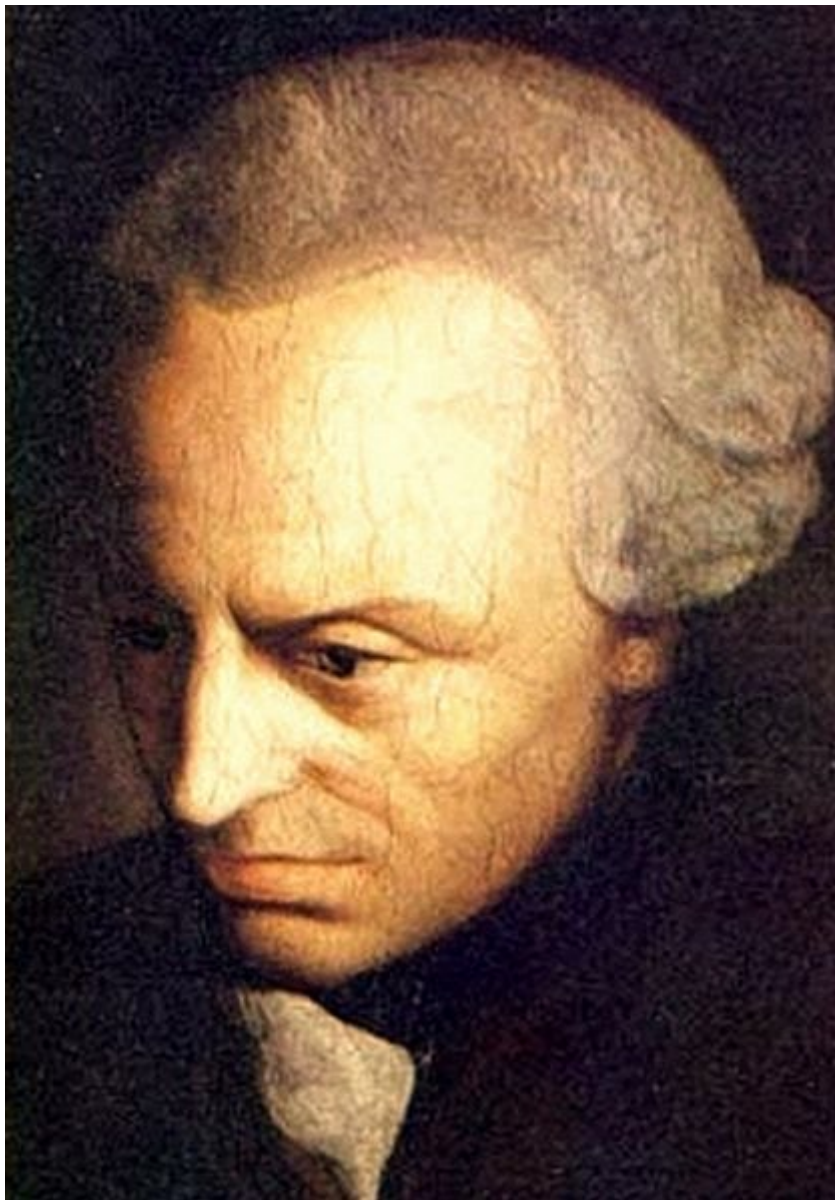
Withal, information is not knowledge. Knowledge is not education. Education is not position, and position is not achievement. All four, even in combination, do not necessarily represent wisdom.

A wonkish or political life often obscures the blackest swans. Bill and Hillary Clinton might serve as exemplars here.

Wisdom is moral choice; doing the right thing, if you will. Knowing the difference between right and wrong might be as good a definition of wisdom as any. Doing the right thing, even when no one is watching, is the key to real maturity.

By Jewish and Christian tradition, wisdom comes with puberty, not in the run-up to senility. Catholics call it the “age of reason.” Presumably; well-bred, well-read, and well-fed children are able to reason the difference between good and evil just as they hit puberty. Good timing, as it turns out, on God’s part.

Meanwhile, choice and free will are the kinds of issues that make philosophers and teaching nuns indispensable. Kant thought the inclination to do the right thing was instinctive: “...an unconditional moral obligation that is binding in all circumstances and is not dependent on a person’s inclination or purpose.”



Immanuel was an echo of Erasmus who championed free will, the notion that all men and women are free to choose between good and evil, failure and success. The psycho-babble industry today rejects notions of success and failure, good and evil, for more clinical adjectives like “healthy” or “ill.”

Psychology is science in the same sense that marijuana is medicine.

With psychology, practice gets lost in the weeds of excuses. Calling a drunk or a junkie a patient is a little like calling genocide population control. The door in and out of addiction is a moral choice, without which there is no exit. Surely, addiction changes body chemistry, just as Russian roulette might alter brain chemistry.

Choice and free will cometh before the falls – a new pill, relapse, or rehab. The only permanent condition that stalks most addicts is the specter of recidivism.

Erasmus and Kant were the antithesis of Martin Luther and Karl Marx, two theologians who pretty much created the social science of victimology and the demography of dependency. If you are still in school or living with your parents when you're thirty, you are likely to be a victim, a Presbyterian, or a Marxist.

Indeed, if your life turns out to be a cat scat salad, you are free to blame fate, capitalism, socialism, or Vladimir Putin. Or you could just phone home – or buy a mirror. Most victims and losers, then and now, are self-made men and women.

Adam Smith might be my favorite apostate and the best example of historical karma. The *Wealth of Nations* and the *American Declaration of Independence* became best sellers in the same year, 1776. Smith, like the American founding fathers, was a moral philosopher.

The key word here is independence. Smith argued that individual and independent enterprises were the “invisible hands” that shaped the wealth and prosperity of individuals and nations. Ben Franklin seconded the notion by telling America to “mind your business.” Franklin was fairly certain that an ounce of entrepreneur was worth a ton of busy bodies, barnacles, and whiners.

It's no accident that a popular 18th Century blog was called *Common Sense*.

Erasmus and Kant pretty much set the table for the modern system of jurisprudence too, shaky as it is. Individuals and nations are responsible for their actions. Were illness, or others, the real culprits, then or now, there would be no need for laws, courts, jails, lawyers, or Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

The political is always personal. When we are guilty, the piper will be paid, now or later. The piper knows who, where, and what you are.

Enlightenment philosophy is the antidote to the moral relativity of rational or "objective" crack pots like Karl Marx, the patronizing idiot savant who influenced two centuries of politicians, jurists, social "scientists," and hippies. Political despots use the latter two like cannon fodder. Marx abandoned his children and family to penury to save the world from surplus; excesses like spending too much on Victoria Secret, Cadillacs, and Leiber handbags.

Were Karl Marx alive today he would probably work at the RAND Corporation, the Council on Foreign Relations, or Ben & Jerry's. Or maybe he'd just be a senator from the left coast.

So whence wisdom in the age of internet autism, virtual virtuosity, indefinite dependency, and congestive consumption?

Surely not the schoolhouse! Forsooth, the American academy today suffers from four crippling handicaps; low standards, confusion, unions, and tenure.

Teachers at the primary and secondary level are drawn from the bottom of the university barrel. With low achievers in charge, the Yankee pre-college student standard is custodial not educational. We have confused attendance with attainment. Feeling good has been confused with being good.

Note the emphasis also on ephemera, high school diplomas or sheepskins, code now for a better paycheck. Alas, the unemployed baccalaureate is just as broke as the unemployed weed whacker.

Tenure is the fatal spike in the coffin of competence. Teachers are like government employees, as indeed many are. They cannot be fired for any reason short of child abuse, chronic voyeurism, or felony homicide.

Winning the struggle with ignorance in America today is like trying to win a World Cup with a team with the worst fans, players, and coaches available; none of which can be ejected, expelled, or fired. Social promotion and toxic tenure are the hobgoblins of American schoolhouse, enlightenment – and surely wisdom.

Nobody wins with the same losers year after year.

Bill Gates, an entrepreneurial drop-out himself, understands the problem. It's difficult to create profitable autistic internet monopolies with industrial teams of needy losers or arrogant underachievers.

Hence, the need for Uncle Sam to import Chinese, Indian, and Japanese computer nerds.

Schooling in America today is not likely to make you curious about anything save getting a job or scoring meaningless credentials with the least amount of effort, knowledge, learning, or skill.

So whence true education? Skills might be key here.

Timid pedagogues are loath to talk about key skills because they associate skill with trade schools, measures of effectiveness, and folks who actually work for a living. Such bias probably explains why many Americans, who might spend a third of their lives in school, can't write a resume with one hand or fix a flat tire with two.

Here we ignore the wisdom of our Greek and Roman antecedents with their lyceums and symposiums, petri dishes for listening and learning. The ancients saw basic rhetorical skills as necessary, but not sufficient, tools; without which learning, no less wisdom, is impossible.

Critical listening, critical reading, coherent writing, and intelligible speaking were the legendary legs of classical learning.

Narrow expertise in any other subject, "majors" like gender or social studies, will always be candles, not cake.

In today's elementary, secondary, and university factories, skill deficits are a variety of expensive ignorance. No culture moves forward with semi-literate "experts" at the helm. No level of specialized expertise compensates for skill vacuums. Semi-literacy is an urban American crisis, a fact to which any honest human resource officer will testify.

Symposiums of yore were often private affairs in private homes where good food and the occasional refreshing adult beverage enlivened the dialogue. Indeed, classical education was homeschooling, an informal gathering of family, friends, and invited guests. Daily dining was opportunity, dialogue, and an exchange

between the learner and the learned.

The best questions might be the most embarrassing.

Illuminating ignorance was an important part of the drill. Knowing what you don't know is as important as what you think you know.

Humility rooms with wisdom.

The original paths to learning were indeed family affairs. Our ancestors must have been quick studies; they were expected to be wise before they got a learner's permit.

Judgment is heredity, something that mature parents pass on like genes, more example and behavior than biology or formal schooling. Parents are the first and best primary teachers. Most nuclear families have 12 years of golden opportunities to hold symposiums at home – at breakfast, lunch, and the dinner tables.

At risk kids are created by failed parents, not failed schools. The example set is the behavior we get. Love is never enough.

Children need more than surrogates like public schools or the good intentions of politicians to compensate for household deficits. The road from me to thee is always shorter with family, friends, and a home-made lunch. See "bento."

If we can believe the ancients, the wise men of Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian tradition, most kids of yore were expected to be wise well before they were wed.

So what happened?

Common sense seems to have gotten lost somewhere between day care and the White House. How did culture become, first, the pursuit of endless summer, then drug addled oblivion, and now a tar pit of dependency.

Good breeding used to have a lot to do with good feeding. Aunt Margaret was correct. *"Much Depends on Dinner."* The single most important thing a parent might do for a child's education is to cook for, and eat with, that child daily. No TV, no electronic gadgets, and no books. Just parents, kids, and the

occasional annoying guest; eating, talking, and learning from each other.

If you are in the habit of keeping company with morons or idiots, by all means eat alone as often as possible.

No school can ever give a child what parents do not. Call it common sense, call it judgment, or call it family tradition. The wisdom of good example is the dessert at every family dinner. Like it or not, every parent is obliged to home school – or see their children fail.

Too many parents excuse themselves from the education grind. Politicians might argue that “it takes a village,” but such cliché wisdom is equivalent of saying that your kids are your neighbor’s problem.

There are no excuses for the deuce that produces.

And rationalizations like the “age gap” are lame too. As Confucius and Plato observed, education is a dialogue, a conversation where learning takes place on either side of the equation.

The boy is father to the man, the girl mother to the woman.

Common sense may be elusive, but it is ageless nonetheless. Little of what we once knew to be true about growth and learning informs the education debate today.

The purgatory that is public schools, including colleges, is like Satre’s *No Exit*; a small room where hell is other people, inert teachers and unruly students at war with civility, society, good manners, and common sense.

Programs like Head Start, charter schools, and Common Core are band aids. Academy reform only makes sense if teachers can be fired and students can be failed; or expelled if necessary. Failure, like success, is an essential individual, institutional, and cultural learning experience.

Schooling might be a right, but education is merely an opportunity; too often, the “road not taken.”

If no child can be “left behind,” then all children suffer. Equal outcome is another way of saying that mediocre, or worse, is good enough. Sport, politics,

war, and life are zero sum games. Misleading youngsters with win/win fantasies is dishonest. Life is not game theory.

Equality is not excellence.

No matter the psychobabble, schools are not exempt from common sense. Tough competition, yea conflict, winners and losers, is the way of the world.

A hat tip to Charles Darwin might be appropriate here.

And “free” lunch programs offer the worst kind of learning. Who believes that kids don’t notice that most public school meals get thrown in the trash? When schooled by inedible food, waste, and intentions gone awry; small wonder then that kids are twice “at risk.”

Beyond the yawning mediocracy of K thru 12, there are two great hazards on the American college campus today.

The first is autistic apathy, aided and abetted by smart phones, laptops, and the internet. You live in the virtual world at the expense of the real world. Only reality, in or out of school, provides the opportunity to hone key rhetorical skills that serve for a career and a lifetime. Facebook /Twitter is the antithesis of face-to-face.

Regard every opportunity to listen, read, write, and speak to real people as conditioning. Every repetition improves every muscle between your ears. Even the boring and repetitive bits with nitwits are useful drills.

A second danger is academic politics, the bong resin of egalitarian socialism, the notion that your brother is your keeper, the notion that someone owes you anything; free lunch, free tuition, good grades, a degree, or a job when you graduate.

Credentials are not marketable. Skill and talent are.

When you enter the real world, you need to be able to do something besides whine. Success or failure is a function of what value added you do, or do not, bring to the table or the marketplace.

Take all that theoretical globalism and egalitarian *bravo sierra* with a grain of

salt. Academia, like government, is not the real world. The best that you can do for your fellow man, at first, is to be as good as you can be.

Elevate your game; then worry about saving the world.

Four years at college is a lifetime for a shithouse mouse. And like the clueless student, the outhouse rodent might never learn that, with a little curiosity and moxie, he could be dining at the cheesecake factory.

You could do worse than think of school as a place you might have to fight your way out of. The energy of poverty should be motive enough.

In any case, know the bright line between the institution and the process, the difference between school and education. For the wise, education is a constant, a companion to the grave. We may eventually know enough to be wise and still not know enough.

Education is the journey not the destination.

Unlike mandatory schooling, learning is a golden opportunity too, not a human right. Political shills, misfits, losers, idiots, and morons are those slices of the population who cannot distinguish between the two.

The goal in learning, or any useful education, is the same as the objective in sport and war. If you must compete, it's always best to come out with aces, on the winning side.

Truth and wisdom, at home and at the school house, are too often absent without leave. Mark Twain recognized the challenge a century ago when he advised students to "Never let schooling get in the way of education."

Wisdom, indeed! *Va bene!*

G. Murphy Donovan is a product of Catholic schools in the East Bronx where the only way out was up.

To comment on this article or to share on social media, please
click