

WISDOM

A Very Valuable Virtue That Cannot Be Bought

by Jason Merchev

When I allow myself to hope that the world will emerge from its present troubles, and that it will someday learn to give the direction of its affairs not to cruel mountebanks, but to men possessed of wisdom and courage, I see before me a shining vision: a world where none are hungry, where few are ill, where work is pleasant and tolerable, where [kindness and connectedness to others] is common, and where minds released from fear create delight for eye and ear and heart. Do not say this is impossible. It is not impossible.

—Bertrand Russell

Rational or free action involves no exemption from having one's actions caused, and no absence of passion. It does not even involve any exemption from the universal human condition of walking in darkness. Through the darkness, however, philosophers walk with a torch of self-knowledge.

—César Dumarsais Chesneau

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter One

**The Wise Value Love, Kindness,
Altruism, And Generosity**

Chapter Two

**Wisdom Involves Emotion Regulation,
Emotional Intelligence, And Integration**

Chapter Three

**Insight And Intuition Are
Aspects Of Wisdom**

Chapter Four

**The Wise Perceive The World With
Empathy, Compassion, And Care**

Chapter Five

**The Wisdom Of Doubt, Skepticism,
And Intellectual Humility**

Chapter Six

Wisdom As Vision

Chapter Seven
The Wise Consider Modesty To Be A Virtue

Chapter Eight
**Applied Wisdom: Practicality, Relevance,
And Utility**

Chapter Nine
**Wisdom Entails Self-Awareness
And Self-Discipline**

Chapter Ten
**Wisdom Is Complex, Nuanced,
And Dynamic**

Chapter Eleven
**The Wise Tolerate Uncertainty,
Practice Patience, And Delay Gratification**

Chapter Twelve
**Open-Mindedness And Mental Flexibility
Are Inherent To Wisdom**

Chapter Thirteen
**Living A Life of Value—Flourishing
And Fulfillment**

Chapter Fourteen
Developing Greater Wisdom

Chapter Fifteen
We Must Begin To Love Wisdom

INTRODUCTION

“Philosophy begins in wonder,” the renowned philosopher Plato revealed centuries ago. *Philosophy* has at least three meanings: the academic discipline, the college course, and the valuable, challenging “tool” (or subject, method, or process) we all have free access to. The latter is an excellent way to try to apprehend wisdom, and though *philosophizing* is not a simple process, it is by no means too complex to be considered useful or intriguing (as I personally consider mathematics to be). The late philosopher par excellence, Bertrand Russell, shares the following enlightening aspect of this beautiful method: “Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom.”

For nearly 3,000 years, *the wise* lived among us and, occasionally, became noted political, religious, or military leaders. But just as the citizens of Athens voted to execute Socrates in 379 B.C.E., today we seem to underestimate wisdom. Or at least, it is difficult to hear wise voices above the din, the distraction, and the disinformation that now plague society! Teachers, religious leaders, scholars, and philosophers have much to teach Americans, yet it is the titan of industry, the business mogul, the sports star, and the celebrity who garner the lion’s share of resources, attention, and respect. I often wonder what has gone so awry in America, and this book directly features important questions—and indirectly offers potential answers from ostensibly wise individuals (and me, too).

War is an interesting case in point for contemplating and understanding wisdom. “War is hell,” it has rightfully been claimed. Clearly, as the Vietnam War (from the perspectives of both sides) showed, the negative results of violence and aggression can be atrocious. Yet, societies from ancient Assyria to modern America valorize it, profit from it, and gain

various political and material advantages from it. It has been with us, and based on the fact that the United States is the number one arms dealer to the world, and we collectively have over four hundred million firearms, it doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon! Individuals can talk inspiringly of peace and of independence, but what do you do if you're the leader of the ancient Israelites and hostile neighbors are breathing down your neck? Or France in the late 1930s? At times in history, as illustrated so adeptly by J. R. R. Tolkien in his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the choice is clear: fight or die.

When it comes to aggression and violence in our hearts and our past, history describes *what happened*, and psychology asks, *what do human beings do?* But it is philosophy that poses penetrating and fascinating questions about such matters (and that can be difficult to answer successfully). Ever since a Greek poet known to history as Homer compiled oral traditions from as long ago as 3,000 years, in the epic poem *The Iliad*, or the historian Thucydides penned the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, it has been a philosophical quest to discover answers to big questions such as: *why do human beings fight so?*; *what is the nature of envy?*; *are we peace-loving or vengeful at heart?*; and, *how can humanity transcend violence?* And ethics delves into matters such as: *when is it right to fight?*; *under what conditions is aggression justifiable?*; and, *what ought I/we to do?* One can respect the truth in history, or the utility of psychology, but one can surely see the wisdom inherent in philosophizing about debatable matters such as anger, violence, and hatred.

“Whether by choice or by necessity, war has been a constant throughout human history,” according to Nicholas Day. He adds, “All civilizations have had to grapple with the questions it raises. The stories we tell of war, the justifications we find for violence, and the condolences we seek for loss all reveal something about our values.” Yet, many thousands of very compelling quotations about peace, mercy, and love of one's neighbor have come down to us through the centuries. This is because peace is a bona fide value that humanity longs for, needs, and benefits from.

Peace is of unparalleled good, no doubt, and yet war *can* be the better choice at certain times. The same can be said for aggression, anger, and violence in regard to both movements within society (e.g., the Civil Rights struggle in the United States, or the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa) as well as for individuals. Namely, when it is better to stand up, clench fists, and face down an opponent—or to do the opposite? Do we listen to those

urging us to take up arms against oppressors and aggressors, or beat our swords into plowshares? Which path is chosen at a given juncture can, as poet Robert Frost put it, “make all the difference.” How is it possible to know what is right, rational, and justified? There are countless methods—often swayed by superstitions, group dynamics, charismatic leaders, and emotion—but the ideal answer is *wisdom*.

Many philosophies, belief systems, and religious frameworks have been proposed since humans first attempted to understand what life is about, how to relate to each other, and what it all means. The last 2,500 years—a mere blip on the evolutionary time scale—have brought unimaginable progress, sophistication, and prosperity. But one look around tells a perceptive person that something is not right.

When I look within or listen carefully to someone’s woes, it is fairly clear that wisdom has the power to alleviate much pain and prevent many missteps in life. I know that individuals and societies have struggled throughout history, but it is disheartening to see my country so benighted and seemingly unable to solve solvable problems. We are truly troubled.

It has become increasingly obvious during the time I have been watching important national and geopolitical events transpire (i.e., 30 years) how little emphasis America as a nation puts on wisdom. The evidence is strewn about as if a hurricane blew through. It is worth remembering, as the acclaimed poet Alexander Pope noted: “Just as the twig is bent the tree’s inclined.” Too many children are growing up to be largely selfish, ignorant, socially isolated, incompetent, and unwise. The post-World-War-II generation may have accomplished much, but they left subsequent generations with a huge amount of debt, an environmentally devastated Earth, and an infotainment nightmare of large proportions.

As I watched Congress present drastically different views of Donald Trump and the nefarious deeds chronicled in the lengthy Mueller report (as well as impeachment number *two*); as I thought about how vaccines are largely responsible for a huge intellectual and emotional rift between my mother and sister and me; when I think back on my deceased father; as I read philosophy or witness the rioters storm the U.S. Capitol; when I think about my career challenges; as I see how the coronavirus pandemic tears at America’s already damaged social fabric; as I contemplate all these issues, problems, and

outrages, I have felt and continue to feel anxious and disheartened. It seems as though everyone everywhere is exasperated and lacks the vision and will to disentangle the knots that bind us all.

Wisdom is that skill/trait/virtue that reduces excessive alcohol consumption, keeps us out of geopolitical catastrophes, prevents unwanted pregnancies, allows us to successfully save for retirement, and helps us avoid a thousand other maladies and mistakes. At the risk of sounding trite, I wholeheartedly maintain that wisdom is a treasure beyond measure. And yet it cannot be bought, stolen, or easily taught. It's a fascinating subject and a virtue of unparalleled power.

It is, however, a challenge to *define*. It is not wrong to say, as Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart did of pornography: "It is difficult to define, but you know it when you see it." It is worth pointing out, though, that pap sometimes masquerades as wisdom, hence the popularity of advertisement-ridden quote websites. We also tend to believe that if a person of high social stature said something it must be true—but that is nothing more than a “rule of thumb” (more on *critical thinking* in future chapters).

If someone relates how they solved a problem, how they dealt with a moral dilemma, or came to some conclusion after looking carefully at an issue, it tends to elicit an eyebrow-raise, a head nod, a bit of a smirk, or perhaps an, *Ok I like that! I see what you did there!* A pastor who is spot-on with a homily or sermon is tapping into timeless wisdom. A song that has the power to bring a tear to one's eye is speaking to that which is common to countless others. Knowing when to use power, and when to show mercy. These are examples of what wisdom looks and feels like.

Wisdom is an exciting topic, and it has many facets (which of course I delve into in this book, one chapter at a time). The following beautiful paragraph by Paul Stearns illustrates some of the nuance that marks philosophy (and a branch within it, *ethics*), “the great ideas,” values, virtues, practical psychology, and the intellectual tradition:

From the Stoics, we can learn to distinguish between what is in our control and what is not, and to avoid investing our hopes in what is not in our control. This can free us from many neurotic behaviors. From some religions, such as Buddhism, we can learn stillness, and realize the interconnectedness of all things. We can learn “the way of

being instead of having” (Erich Fromm). Empathy and community grow from these insights which, in turn, nourish some of the deepest forms of happiness and human actualization. From Epicurus, we learn how to avoid vain desires, and to not give in to the advertisers and emotions that create them. So, we learn to live a simple and deeply meaningful life built around relationships, clean living, and reflection. From Socrates and Plato, we learn to use the Socratic Method of persistent inquiry, which leads to humility, wisdom, and provides ways to cultivate health and virtue, where health is the harmony of the body, and virtue is the harmony of the soul or mind. From Aristotle, we learn moderation and how to cultivate virtuous habits. These examples are a taste for the wisdom found in philosophy. So, we should live well; and this means we should study philosophy.

While I promise that the reader who perseveres will know more about wisdom, values, and virtues than the average person, I suspect that if asked to communicate what wisdom *is*, they still will not be able to sum it up succinctly and eloquently because it’s just, well, *complex*. The study of wisdom isn’t challenging the way quantum physics is, but it’s not a cut-and-dried concept that can be easily or fully internalized. But then, nothing worth having comes easily. Frankly, one impediment to wisdom was put eloquently twenty centuries ago by the Roman writer Seneca, “Many people could attain wisdom if they were not convinced that they had already done so.”

So, for the first time of many, I will quote the late expert on wisdom, author Cophorne Macdonald. He wrote the following in his book *Toward Wisdom: Finding Our Way to Inner Peace, Love, and Happiness*, and it amounts to a quick and dirty sketch of what wisdom is:

Short statements about wisdom can be helpful as long as we realize that each expresses only *part* of the truth. Having said that, it seems likely that wisdom involves:

- seeing things clearly; seeing things as they are
- acting in prudent and effective ways
- making decisions with the well-being of the whole in mind
- deeply understanding the human and cosmic situation, mankind’s experience, and human nature
- knowing when to act and when not to
- being able to handle whatever arises with equanimity, and to deal with such issues in a compassionate and holistic way

- being able to anticipate potential problems and avoid them.

Macdonald subsequently emphasizes, “Each of these statements helps clarify some *aspect* of wisdom, but none tells the whole story—reveals the *gestalt*, if you will.”

As far as it is known, the human brain (and mind, which are inextricably connected yet separate things!) is the most sophisticated thing in the universe. Discerning, disentangling, and discovering *the nature of human nature* has been a challenge ever since human beings began to delve into such matters. Nothing about politics, psychology, or ethics is simple and tidy; this was so for Socrates and the philosophers who came before him, and they are still shrouded in some mystery. Many issues and phenomena of a philosophical nature are knotty and challenging both to understand and put into practice. One look around should validate the claim that politics is neither simple nor settled.

Something human beings have going for us is that we are unendingly curious, extremely intelligent, and capable of great insights—from quantum physics to astrophysics. Problems and challenges have been falling like dominoes for *Homo sapiens* for the past ten thousand years. Yet rather than having ushered in a utopia for the citizens of the world, humanity’s Doomsday Clock sits at one minute to midnight!¹ Despite how far we have come, we have gotten virtually nowhere. The late General Omar Bradley astutely noted, “The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.”

With all the debt, carbon in the atmosphere, and poverty plaguing the nation as well as the world, America is at the point where careful contemplation and philosophical dialogue are glaringly absent. It always amazes me how few individuals take more than one (if that!) philosophy class in their entire lives. With all the time spent on computer games and reality television shows, reading a paper book seems to be rare nowadays. A society that fails to facilitate the production of deeply and substantially educated citizens is not going to do well.

But philosophizing is something everyone is capable of (with learning and practice), and it can be very illuminating and rewarding!

Philosophy and psychology played such an important role in my precarious adolescence that someone once pointed out, “Socrates saved you.” Cornel West, that inimitable individual who wears many professional hats, says of philosophy:

Despite what many people think or tend to believe they think, philosophy isn’t as complex as it seems. In fact, it’s quite simple if you just take a moment to adjust your mindset. Because really, philosophy is just curiosity. Curiosity about the world and the people and things that live in it. It’s a channel we use to seek understanding about others and to connect the information we know and live by.

What follows is an example of putting wisdom into practice (an overarching theme of this book). In a 2020 article in *The Atlantic*, Ed Yong delves into what he frames as “America trapped in a pandemic spiral.” As of this writing, the country is absolutely *stuck* in a bear trap (mostly of our own making!); American citizens’ record in terms of dealing with COVID-19 (as of early 2022) is as shocking as it is disappointing. Yong penned a couple of paragraphs I think will shed light on what I’m trying to communicate:

Many Americans trusted intuition to help guide them through this disaster. They grabbed onto whatever solution was most prominent in the moment, and bounced from one (often false) hope to the next. They saw the actions that individual people were taking, and blamed and shamed their neighbors. They lapsed into magical thinking and believed that the world would return to normal within months. Following these impulses was simpler than navigating a web of solutions, staring down broken systems, and accepting that the pandemic would rage for at least a year.

These conceptual errors were not egregious lies or conspiracy theories, but they were still dangerous. They manifested again and again, distorting the debate around whether to stay at home, wear masks, or open colleges. They prevented citizens from grasping the scope of the crisis and pushed leaders toward bad policies. And instead of overriding misleading intuitions with calm and considered communication, those leaders intensified them. The country is now trapped in an “intuition nightmare”

This is a brilliant glimpse into the nature of wisdom and how it has the potential to pay amazing dividends—if one puts in the investment up front. Yong is pointing out that *intuition*, a part of wisdom, is not a skill or capacity that one simply has because they are a nice person, an intelligent person, or a lucky person. No wrestler can win the match without intensive training, and no lover of wisdom can expect to possess and benefit from the beauty and power that wisdom entails without due effort. Again, wisdom is free to all who desire it, but it is not simple, easy, or quick.

We are living in a time and place where so many seem to be so sure about how much they know, often about some very complex topics! In countless school board meetings, at nearly every table during Thanksgiving, and on virtually all social media, emotions run high and battle lines are drawn. Truth falls along a continuum: from *complete bullshit* all the way to *wisdom worthy of Solomon*. Though I'm not entirely confident that capital-T *Truth* is relative, we all must *perceive* the abstruse and noble phenomenon, so some of us necessarily apprehend it more fully and astutely than certain others do—and this can change from year to year, subject to subject.

The noted psychologist Fritz Perls maintained (rightly, I think) that “truth can be tolerated only if you discover it for yourself.” We Americans are living in a time and place not of uniform respect for a venerated and largely similar conception of Truth (as well as other values, such as liberty and morality), but a time of maximum subjectivity and egocentrism. A heterogenous society that allows anyone to do it however they want, and one of waning respect for agreed-upon values and institutions, is a recipe for discord and fragmentation. Alarmingly, the great humanistic psychologist Erich Fromm theorized about this state of affairs more than *fifty years ago*. I think in a way America is experiencing its adolescence, and a quote by a giant in the field of developmental psychology, G. Stanley Hall, goes: “Adolescence is when the very worst and best impulses in the human soul struggle against each other for possession.”

Though the preceding paragraphs can be alarming (and are to me!), wisdom is our friend. It recognizes things that can easily be overlooked; wisdom sees deeply into the nature of things and perceives values, significance, and wonder. It is a rigorously efficient perception of reality. It transcends sense perception, routine cognition, cultural programming, errors in thinking, and mere feelings. The true beauty and power of wisdom can be

glimpsed when one understands the complexities and the possibilities that can be perceived and felt deep in the “emotional brain”—and processed by the powerful more recently developed parts of the brain.

Author Jan Phillips notes that “the ability to hold two contradictory thoughts simultaneously is not just a matter of true genius; it is a matter of true freedom.” Noted physicist Wolfgang Pauli indicated that “the only acceptable point of view appears to be the one that recognizes both sides of reality—the quantitative and the qualitative, the physical and the psychological—as compatible with each other, and can embrace them simultaneously.” Each of us, at one time or another, glimpses the extremely nuanced and intriguing nature of reality. This is tantamount to wisdom.

I have been looking into wisdom for nearly two decades and have come to believe that wisdom is not only one of humanity's highest aspirations, but also our best hope. That is: this potent and sought-after skill (or, alternatively, an attribute, characteristic, or phenomenon) can help us navigate most of the challenging aspects of being human.

Rather than fret that this moment in the life of the republic portends the decline of American hegemony and America’s unique culture, I just might be able to find some solace in what modern philosopher Alain de Botton referred to as “the consolations of philosophy.” Socrates stayed true to his values even unto death, so I believe America needs its lovers of wisdom to keep their chins up and face the storm. And if worse comes to worst, all people of goodwill can take heart in the fact that when they were living in “times that try men’s souls,” they stood up straight, remembered their character, and did their best.

Wisdom can be helpful in interpersonal relations, business matters, philosophical/ethical conundrums, religious quandaries, daily dilemmas, and the various and sundry challenges we each face simply by being alive. The Buddhists are a great example of the ability to use wisdom to make the road we must walk easier on our soles—as well as on our figurative souls!

I’m describing a skill or adaptation like creativity, self-discipline, courage, intuition, or love. It is akin to a personality trait, but not exactly synonymous with the term. It can’t be bought or possessed per se, but those who develop psychological strength and “inner knowing” will outcompete and outlive those who lack them. In fact, wisdom underlies so much—success, fulfillment, and prosperity—that it’s almost unnoticeable!

The issue here is not whether wisdom is a remarkable and potent asset. Socrates, Confucius, Jesus, the Buddha, Hypatia, and countless others have known this and heralded it for centuries. It is a *good* of unparalleled proportions. Thomas Aquinas noted that “of all the pursuits open to men, the search for wisdom is more perfect, more sublime, more profitable, and more full of joy.” And one look within will confirm this for each of us. The rub is that it is at times very difficult to actualize.

Following leaders blindly, becoming addicted to mind-altering substances, belonging to religious sects (such as Scientology or Wahhabism), falling victim to the modern Siren song of committing mass murder—these, among numerous other actions and practices, all signal that one is out of touch with wisdom. I have even taken to calmly saying, “That is exceedingly unwise!” in reaction to some of the utterly inexplicable behavior I see on the nightly news or read about in the news magazine *The Week*.

I believe wisdom does lie within many of us and could be so much more loved and manifested by billions of others. (The word philosophy, derived from Greek, is “love of wisdom”). I don't even know whether wisdom can effectively be taught in the manner in which tennis, appreciation of literature, or driver education is taught. If one could learn wisdom from another person in an educational setting, it would be more akin to studying a Shakespearean play or the highest levels of mathematics.

For example, when law enforcement recruits undergo training, instructors hope that the cadets will one day be able to use their wisdom to determine when, how, why, and to what extent to use force. In the actions of, say, Michael Slager, the former North Charleston, SC, police officer who shot a fleeing unarmed suspect in the back (Walter Scott), one can detect an alarming lack of good judgment, prudence, and wisdom. The Slager shooting is one of countless examples of how wisdom, applied successfully, can make all the difference. I am not the only one who saw the videotaped footage of Derrick Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd and virtually yelled at the screen, “How stupid can a man be!?” He was cruel; he was callous; he was derelict, but he was also unwise.

The "Serenity Prayer" composed by Reinhold Niebuhr explicitly refers to this profound and ancient asset by name: "God, give me the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and *wisdom* to distinguish the one from

the other." It is a scintillating example of how wisdom is what is needed to know when, how, and to what extent to exemplify, utilize, or manifest differing virtues in one's life. Only wisdom has the power to assist a person in making a careful and prudent determination about which of the paths before them, in both mundane and momentous situations, is likely the best one.

"In seeking wisdom, thou art wise; in imagining that thou hast attained it, thou art a fool," noted Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai centuries ago. Little on this score has changed since. So, I definitely do not intend to sell a reader on the wonders of wisdom that, like the snake oil of yore, can cure all ills with little effort or cost. If I were "selling something," I would have to admit it is slow-acting, figuratively expensive, and hard to come by. Still, there will be some who are so interested in the mystique and power of wisdom that they will be able to improve their understanding of the fundamentals and put them into practice with some consistency and success. Others seem to come by it with less effort and fewer impediments (this is supported by the fact that wisdom is not strongly correlated with age!). I believe there are a hundred or more things within these pages that can be helpful to the reader in that regard.

In producing this book, I drew from a diverse selection of modern books on wisdom, and I feather in a number of insights and opinions of mine. I hope to share a bit of myself, but primarily aim to enlighten the reader with an inspirational array of thoughts, beliefs, and quotations from many individuals throughout the ages. In my view, wisdom is both broad and deep, and thus the best way to elucidate it is to bring many astute, diverse voices to the fore. Such a wise chorus is more reliable and interesting than citing one single source—and could be fairly compared to what is known in social science as *the wisdom of crowds*.

I delve into allied aspects of wisdom in each of the chapters within—and they all are pretty self-contained (so if a topic is not interesting to a reader, I see no problem with them skipping the chapter and moving to the next). Put together, the hallmarks of wisdom herein add up to what I consider to be a fairly satisfactory account of what wisdom truly *is*—well, to the degree

that I have a sufficient grasp of it! It's my hope that the reader will gain a greater appreciation for the potential, the power, and the payoff of wisdom.

Though I mention more than once that this topic is not particularly simple or intuitive, I do believe this book is for any interested, curious person (of any level of sophistication, and moderate political orientation). This is fascinating stuff but not rocket science, as it were, and the pages within will enlighten any persistent reader. In fact, some astute ones will even see ways in which I missed the mark—or envision aspects they themselves would have handled differently! I would welcome such criticism because it will mean I am eliciting critical thinking in the reader—my top goal. At the end of the day, I feel sure that as with any skill or virtue, the more one thinks about wisdom and tries to realize progress in one's life, the easier it will become.

I end each chapter with a number of beautiful, interesting, controversial, or *apparently true* quotations from a wide variety of individuals. Below is a diverse grouping of quotations about wisdom in general:

"Great is wisdom; infinite is the value of wisdom. It cannot be exaggerated; it is the highest achievement of man."—Thomas Carlyle

"The deepest motive for reading has to be the quest for wisdom."
—Harold Bloom

"Empty is the argument of the philosopher which does not relieve any human suffering."—Epicurus

"Ancient Greco-Roman philosophy, an influence on learning worldwide in fields from poetry to physics, is nothing if not deep. It presupposes inwardness—the cultivation of an inner life—and the centrality of the search for meaning as the paramount human endeavor. Inwardness is the way the self develops the resources necessary for everything from enduring hardship to soaring to the heights of a fulfilled human life."
—Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn

“By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the bitterest.”—Confucius

“The function of intelligence is characterized by focusing on questions of how to accomplish necessary life-supporting tasks; the function of wisdom is characterized by provoking the individual to consider the consequences of his or her actions.... Wisdom, therefore, evokes questions of whether one *should* pursue a particular course of action.”—Vivian Clayton

“Philosophy means the complete liberty of the mind, and therefore independence of all social, political or religious prejudice.... It loves one thing only: truth.”—Henri Frédéric Amiel

“He that never thinks can never be wise.”—Samuel Johnson

“The right kind of life finds us committing ourselves and our rational powers to what is worth thinking about. Given a choice between contemplating issues of philosophical consequence and contemplating changes in the stock market, a more ‘flourishing’ life is lived by those who contemplate the former rather than the latter.”—Daniel N. Robinson

“Questions you cannot answer are usually far better for you than answers you cannot question.”—Yuval Noah Harari

“I believe that love of truth is the basis of all real virtue.”
—Bertrand Russell

“You have no choice about the necessity to integrate your observations, your experiences, your knowledge into abstract ideas, i.e., into principles. Your only choice is whether these principles are true or false, whether they represent your conscious, rational conviction—or a grab-bag of notions snatched at random whose sources, validity, context, and consequences you do not know....”—Ayn Rand

“The acorn becomes an oak by means of automatic growth; no commitment is necessary. The kitten similarly becomes a cat on the basis of instinct. Nature and being are identical in creatures like them. But a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices and his or her commitment to them. People attain worth and dignity by the multitude of decisions they make from day to day. These decisions require courage.”

—Rollo May

“Two of the great lessons humanity will learn in the twenty-first century will be: to harm another is to harm oneself, and when you heal yourself you heal the world.”—Yung Pueblo

“Inherent in our existence as human beings are such questions as: What kind of entity should I seek to become? By what principles should I guide my life? What values are worthy of pursuit?”—Alfie Kohn

“We learn wisdom from failure much more than from success; we often discover what will do, by finding out what will not do; and probably he who never makes a mistake never made a discovery.”—Samuel Smiles

“We live in the present, we dream of the future, but we learn eternal truths from the past.”—Chiang Kai-shek

“Most people believe they know how they themselves think, and how others think too, and even how institutions evolve. But they are wrong. Their understanding is based on folk psychology—the grasp of human nature by common sense, which is defined by Einstein as ‘everything learned to the age of eighteen.’”—Edward O. Wilson

“There are many who know many things yet are lacking in wisdom.”
—Democritus)

“The question of whether or not there is a God or truth or reality (or whatever you like to call it), can never be answered by books, priests, philosophers, or saviors. Nobody and nothing can answer the question but you yourself—and that is why you must know yourself. This is the beginning of wisdom.”—Jiddu Krishnamurti

“I will be the first to confess that I have not always lived a life that incorporates the values that Socrates recommended. Nor have I been as compassionate as I should, and have too often turned away from the demands which justice requires. These are the values for which I strive. [But, that relative failure] ... is an opportunity for exercising my freedom to choose, my ability to rationally and critically examine cherished beliefs, and my capacity for self-transcendence.”—Gary E. Kessler

“The sublimity of wisdom is to do those things living which are to be desired when dying.”—Jeremy Taylor

“What is worth doing? What kind of life do I want to lead? In what sort of thing am I apt to find my creative opportunity, my flow, my bliss? It all starts with our values, and by becoming clear about what is truly important to us. Once that’s done, the details will figure themselves out.”
—Cophorne Macdonald

“Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you’d have preferred to talk.”—Doug Larson

“Too many young folks have an *addiction* to superficial things, and not enough *conviction* for substantial things—like justice, truth and love.”
—Cornel West

“Only through the constant testing of ‘truth’ can we find it. Such testing must be accompanied by modesty, humility, and an awareness of our ignorance and our fallibility—even when we are sure we are right. *Especially* then.”
—Jack Hernandez

“The philosophic tradition of Greece is essentially a movement of enlightenment and liberation. For it aims at freeing the mind from the bonds of ignorance. It removes the fear of the unknown by presenting the world as something accessible to reason. Its vehicle is the *logos* and its aspiration the pursuit of knowledge under the form of the Good. Disinterested inquiry is itself regarded as ethically good; through it, rather than through religious mysteries, do men achieve the good life.”
—Bertrand Russell

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”—Socrates