

From Adversity to Wisdom: How People Experience Transformative Learning to Redeem Adversity and Serve a Greater Good

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Abstract: Through an interview process, within a constructivist paradigm, this study links wisdom to transformative learning by reporting on 42 individuals who were nominated as being wise. In addition, these participants experienced a redemptive sequence leading to a greater good at the end of the transformative learning cycle.

Introduction

The present study derives from the author's 2006 doctoral dissertation research at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. In that study, wisdom and its relationship to loss and adversity were explored in the lives of fifteen nurses who were nominated as being wise. That qualitative study, which employed methods of interview and narrative analysis, revealed some insights about the nature of transformational learning and the path these nurses took to wisdom.

Most interesting, the nurses in the 2006 study found meaning in the losses and adversities they encountered in their lives, and these acted as the disorienting dilemma in the transformational cycle that ensued. Uniquely however, the transformational cycle leading to wisdom for these nurses included an additional experience that might be called a "redemptive sequence" (Tadeschi & Calhoun 1995; Lauritzen & Jaegar 1997; Turner & Cox 2004.). This term comes from the field of physical rehabilitation and refers to a change in perspective that comes directly from finding meaning in the initiating suffering. In addition, the redemptive sequence as part of the transformational process, led these nurses to the discovery of and commitment to what they perceive as their purpose on earth, often leading to a greater good. This is consistent with Mezirows (2000) assertion that, "A new way of seeing has to lead to some kind of action" (p.335).

The present study continues the 2006 research, extending it to people across America who are nominated as being wise by someone who knows them. The relationship between adversity and wisdom and the presence of the transformational learning process with a redemptive sequence continues to appear as a prevalent theme.

Theoretical Frame

The present study is part of a research project in process called *Wisdom Out*. The title, *Wisdom Out*, is meant to convey the idea that wisdom is a potential in all people that may in fact be activated by the transformative change process initiated by a disorienting dilemma. It draws on transformative learning theory, explicit and folk views of wisdom, and redemptive sequence.

Much of the wisdom literature either directly or tacitly, comes around to mention loss, adversity, suffering, and even despair as being linked to wisdom (Bleyl (2000), Randall & Kenyon (2001), Birren & Fisher (1990), Bridges (1980), Chandler & Holliday (1990). Randall and Kenyon (2001) claim, "...ordinary wisdom involves, paradoxically, growth through diminishment and gain through loss. It involves finding meaning and even peace through suffering" (p.100). Shedding some light on why some people crumble in the face of loss and others hold fast and even grow, Viktor Frankl (1992) says despair is suffering without meaning. This can be expressed in a formula that reveals the idea that the difference between suffering and despair has to do with the outcome. That is, $D = S - M$: Despair is suffering without meaning. Suffering *with* meaning can lead to something other than despair. For Viktor Frankl, it led to a life worth living.

Bleyl (2000) also found adversity to be a common element in the lives of the twenty adults representing several different cultures who participated in her study of wisdom. In spite of adverse and non-supportive conditions often beginning in childhood for many of her participants, many possessed "an attitude of life formed in response to adversity" (p. 372). Writing about "ordinary wisdom," Randall and Kenyon (2001) say, "...wisdom is about finding meaning in life and suffering" (p. 13). Holliday and Chandler (1986) cite Brent and Watson from a presentation they gave at a 1980 meeting of the Gerontology Association as describing a "developmental motivation for becoming wise which incorporates the idea that personal suffering plays an essential role in the attainment of wisdom (p. 28)." They suggest that suffering and pain that results from exposure to long-term arbitrary injustices, can certainly break a person. But for those who do not break, these same factors can "precipitate the achievement of a new and more complex equilibrium which they regard as the hallmark of wisdom" (p. 28). Norman (1996) seems to agree with the perspective that the wise ones experience loss pointing out that the wise ones might know the same things that we all know in our rational mind, but they go a step further and also seem able to call it up and apply it in context of real life challenges.

The redemptive sequence as referenced in this study, refers to a narrative that is emotionally negative followed by a narrative that is emotionally positive and contains a positive outcome, which redeems and provides meaning for the negative events that precede it (McAdams & Bowman 2001).

Sternberg (2000) offers what he calls the "balance theory" of wisdom that claims that wisdom involves a balance of personal interests and responses, which are mediated by values, to the context of the environment to achieve a common good. In the balance theory, wisdom is revealed in the appropriateness of the solution to the situation, and is in service of a common and even greater good.

Methods

The present study is hermeneutic and constructivist, within the qualitative tradition. Through autobiographical narratives, it attempts to draw meaning from the actions the participants depict in the stories they tell about themselves.

Primarily through word of mouth, people from all over the United States nominated the participants for the present study. A nomination form, found on the

Wisdom Out website offered a convenient way to collect these nominations. At present, 42 people have been interviewed. Interviews will total 100 at the close of the project. One person of the 42 requested anonymity.

Nominators were not provided with an "official" definition of wisdom. Instead, they use their own good judgment, drawing on their internal theory of wisdom. This works because curiously enough and in spite of a scholarly lack of consensus about what wisdom is, Holliday and Chandler found in their 1986 study that groups of young, middle aged and older persons agreed on how they characterized wisdom. In other words, most people seem to know wisdom when they see it. It could be surmised that most of us, probably using our own lives as examples, can distinguish between foolishness and wisdom and can painfully recall occasions when we acted the fool. Sternberg (2000) writes, "Foolishness is an extreme failure of wisdom" (p. 236).

Through the personal long interview, the 42 wise people in the present study told important stories about their lives. Each participant was asked to respond to this question: What are the events and experiences in your life that have made you who you are today?

Each of the interviews were recorded with permission, transcribed, analyzed and interpreted. Through constant comparative analysis, themes emerged and were labeled for discussion. Stories offer a narrative approach to understanding the world, and for this study, in understanding wisdom, loss and responses to loss as told by the participants. The narrative offers a structure familiar to readers of literature. There may be a plot, characters, conflict and resolution (Lauritzen and Jaegar, 1997). Yet, it is what Randall and Kenyon (2001) call "the inside story" which can be an amalgamation of memories, fantasies, thoughts, perceptions or feelings.

Findings

39 of the 42 wise people interviewed for the *Wisdom Out* project told a personal story that could be coded as a redemptive sequence. That is, stories beginning with an event that could be described as having a negative charge, but ended with a positively charged legacy or "greater good." Within these stories, participants described a process of growth that could be seen as the transformative learning process, beginning with the negative event (disorienting dilemma).

Examples of the redemptive sequence within the stories of the participants reveal evidence of a greater good – a characteristic of wisdom as described by Sternberg and others. These examples can be seen in Table 1 below. Notice that the legacy of the greater good often directly redeems the original disorienting dilemma.

Table 1
Samples of the Redemptive Sequence in Wisdom Out Participants

Participant	Disorienting Dilemma	Redemptive Legacy
Char Teters Spokane, WA	Her children's distress due to racism	Removing American Indian mascots from schools
Boo Thomas Baton Rouge, LA	Feeling blame for her parents addictions	Helping people recover from Hurricane Katrina
Wallace Howard	His own dyslexia and difficulties	Designed a reading

Participant	Disorienting Dilemma	Redemptive Legacy
Charlotte, NC	in school	program for special needs kids
Edward Rastovski Wahoo, NE	Grew up in poverty and almost did not go to college as a result	Became superintendent of schools in a struggling community
Mark Cerney Columbia, SC	His dear childhood caretaker died while he was out of town. Mark was never notified	Created the Next of Kin Register, a worldwide service helping people find loved ones
Jonathan Sperling Torrance, CA	Saddened and frustrated by his inability to reach his HS students	Started the I Care program to inspire HS students to become involved
Dr. Miguel Alvarez Greenport, NY	Fled Chile in 1973 during the coup that led to the reign of Pinochet, leaving his medical practice and elderly mother behind	Became a psychiatrist in the United States working with elder people in nursing homes
Christina Baldwin Whidbey Island, WA	As a child, felt unnoticed and escaped into journal writing as a way to track the events of her life	Today, Christina works as a “story catcher.” She teaches writing and listens to the stories her students tell
Cindy Mendelson Albuquerque NM	Was diagnosed with a connective tissue disease	Now devotes her research to helping women with lupus live better lives.
Gwen Whiting Marietta, GA	Father was ignored in his dying hours by doctors – because he was an alcoholic –	Conducts writing classes for women who are recovering from addictions, helping them publish a book of their own poems and stories
Kevin Morrisroe Albuquerque, NM	A gay man who worked with the first patients with AIDS, during a time when it was not "O.K." to come out	Is now planning to work with AIDS patients in Africa.

Discussion

We see wisdom in the ways people respond to adversity and in how difficult matters of life turn out. We see it in the words and actions of a person in the midst of a challenge or dilemma. We see it in the decisions made and the effect of those decisions on the lives of those impacted. The 42 participants in this study are all remarkable human beings living meaningful lives. But are they wise? The participants in the Wisdom Out study are thought to be wise by someone who knows them. As subjective as this might appear at first, researchers have indeed observed that people agree about wisdom in others when they see it.

It is interesting to note that even without a definition of “wisdom”, 39 out of 42 of the nominated participants tell a transformative learning story that includes a redemptive sequence of the original disorienting dilemma, resulting in a greater good. Although not conclusive, this common theme points to an inextricable

relationship between transformative learning, the redemptive sequence, and the development of wisdom. In addition we see that loss and adversity is essential to the redemptive sequence for the participants in this study. This suggests that a person who is experiencing loss and adversity may possess a greater opportunity for wisdom to grow, as opposed to a person whose life is relatively free from loss and adversity.

The term *transformative learning* as used in the present study evokes Mezirow's (2000) definition referencing a direct shift in perspective prompted by a disorienting dilemma that causes a person to question what they previously believed unquestionable. The present study suggests that those who are thought to be wise undergo the transformative learning process as described by Mezirow, but with the addition of a redemptive sequence that leads to a greater good.

Consider Gwen who watched her alcoholic dad bleed to death under the unfortunate care of doctors who, steeped in their own assumptions about alcoholism, did not value his life. Thirty years later Gwen found herself teaching women in addiction recovery programs how to write. Not only did she teach them, she also oversaw the publication of a book of their essays and poems. Gwen could have become bitter, angry, firmly entrenched in thoughts of revenge. But she chose not to. Gwen chose to treat these women with dignity – in the same way that her father was not. This is the redemptive sequence in action. As Pema Chodron (1997) says, "It surprises us that darkness is the source of inspiration."

Because each participant in this study knew that it had "something to do with wisdom and loss," and that they were nominated because someone who knew them thought they were "wise," one might reasonably assume that the stories told were selected and framed by the individual according to that person's personal and implicit theory of wisdom. As such, this research might even identify participant views of the type of life events they associate with becoming wise. This creates somewhat of a three-way link between these individual's personal theories of wisdom, the events that made them wise, and the individual's responses to important and challenging matter of life, such as loss or adversity. It is important to note however, that the participants themselves did not make these links explicit. None of them said, "This is why I am wise today." Rather, the nature and format of the present study elicited narrative stories from the participants, which the researcher made visible through the qualitative constructivist paradigm through which the stories could be understood.

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