

# Does Wisdom Increase with Age?

By George Vaillant, MD

The compensation of growing old, Peter Walsh thought, coming out of Regent's Park, and holding his hat in hand, was simply this: that the passions remain as strong as ever, but one had gained—at last!—the power which adds the supreme flavour to existence—the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly, in the light.

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

I am a very foolish fond old man....you must bear with me.

Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Aging is not a simple concept, nor is wisdom. At age 50—17 years ago—when I applied for a grant from the National Institute of Aging to undertake the study on which this book is based, my initial application was turned down. How, the 70-year-old chairman of my review committee fumed, could I plan to study *aging* if I defined aging in terms of decay? The chairman viewed aging as a vital life process, not as senescence to be postponed as long as possible. When I received my pink rejection slip, I grouched that he was just a pedantic curmudgeon who rigidly dismissed a splendid grant request written by a 50-year-old-height-of-my-powers-still-fitting-into-suits-of-20-years-earlier me. Of course, he was right; I was still a mere stripling of 50. What did I know about aging? Because I was callow and fearing my own future, I had proposed studying aging as merely the relative rate at which physical deterioration took place. Up to then, it had rarely occurred to me that old people could be interesting.

So, in writing this book, I must acknowledge a great debt to the wisdom and experience of my grant review chairman, James Birren, *eminence gris* of the science of gerontology. Thanks to him I paused, reflected, and I rewrote the grant. I would study aging as a process. My grant request was not only approved, but subsequently received a NIH Merit Award—10 years of continuous funding. Why? Because the vision of a 70-year-old can be wiser than that of a 50-year-old.

It is true that cream and eggs have a limited shelf life and that 20-year-old Chevrolets rarely excite envy. But it is also true that cheese, wine, and stately oaks often grow more complex with age because of, rather than in spite of, their “decay.” And Homer made Nestor, who was the oldest of the Greeks, also the wisest.

Yet one swallow does not make a summer. Anecdotes do not answer whether wisdom really increases with age. Perhaps the association of wisdom with old age is merely an old wives tale? Do we endow the elderly with wisdom only as a good-hearted effort to jolly them along—like telling the obese that they have sweet dispositions? Or is wisdom a special boon that life bestows upon the elderly?

Which epigraph shall we believe? Woolf's or Shakespeare's? The very wise William Shakespeare, in the last tragedy that he ever wrote, had the wisdom to make Lear's young fool wise and the 80-year-old king foolish. Two of the very best definitions of wisdom that I have encountered came from young relatives. My wise young niece, Marian Wrobel, provided one definition: "Wisdom consists of many rich experiences that have been reflected upon until they can be empathically communicated to others." My wise young son-in-law, Michael Buehler, noted that what all definitions of wisdom "have in common is the capacity and the willingness to step back from the immediacy of the moment—whether it is an affect, a judgement, or a conflict—in order to attain perspective."

But what is the most salient characteristic of wisdom? Everybody has a different definition. Paul Baltes, perhaps the leading scholar in the world of wisdom development, has wisely pointed out, "There are exactly as many distinct solutions to the structure of wisdom as there are investigative teams at work on the problem."

When told, "Wisdom is often associated with advanced age," and then asked, "What qualities would you look for in a wise man?" several of the Harvard Study members remarked that they had been wiser when they were younger. However, others believed, like Virginia Woolf, that wisdom increases with age and described it as:

"Empathy through which one must synthesize both care and justice."

"Tolerance and a capacity to appreciate paradox and irony even as one learns to manage uncertainty."

"A seamless integration of affect and cognition."

"Self-awareness combined with an absence of self-absorption."

"The capacity to 'hear' what others say."

"Perspective, sense of the larger context of life, realization that there are two sides to everything, nothing is black or white. Patience. Sense of the irony of life."

"You gotta remain inquisitive about your surroundings."

"A sense of the connectedness of all things; or as the wise old guru said to the Coney Island hot-dog seller, 'Make me one with everything.'"

There are many paths to the top of the mountain. Everybody's definition of wisdom will be different in the words; but the melody, I suspect, will be the same. Wisdom consists of multiple facets. Among the most important facets are maturity, knowledge, experience and intelligence—both cognitive and emotional.

Certainly wisdom is not restricted to the old. To illustrate the complexities of wisdom I shall repeat a true story told me by an old grandmother who could have been, but was not, a member of the Stanford University's famous Terman intelligence study. A brilliant young woman in her 20s from the Deep South had come during

World War II to Cody, Wyoming. There she encountered one of the notorious internment camps for Japanese Americans evacuated from the West Coast by our government. There the Japanese Americans were relegated by the xenophobia of “Anglo Wyomians” to second-class citizenship. There, to her indignation, they were excluded from many of the stores and denied any role in town affairs.

As a solution, this courageous young Caucasian pointed out to the city fathers that the Japanese Americans still had the vote and that they outnumbered the Anglo citizens of Cody. How would the city fathers respond to the challenge of having a Japanese mayor, a Japanese superintendent of schools, and a Japanese police chief after the next election? She thought she could arrange it.

She got the city fathers’ attention. Overt intolerance vanished and the internees were treated more empathically. Prematurely wise, this young political activist understood context, past and future. She made an exception for the town pharmacist whose daughter had been an army nurse captured on Corregidor and subjected to the cruelty of the Bataan Death March and Japanese imprisonment. In his drugstore, he alone was permitted to discriminate.

In terms of the multiple facets of wisdom, first this young woman was *mature* enough to empathize with two cultural groups other than her own. Second, she displayed common sense and sound moral discernment. Third, because she appreciated context, she was trusted by all the Cody villagers. Fourth, she was *intelligent*—already a published *New Yorker* author with only a high-school degree, she saw through to the heart of the matter. Peace, not violence, resulted from her meddling. Fifth, she showed *emotional intelligence*. She integrated care and justice and had the chutzpah to get away with it. But like King Solomon, in the days when he was wise, she was very young.

We all regard the acquisition of wisdom as an essential part of successful aging, but there is scant evidence that the old are any wiser than other people over 30. First, consider the just-mentioned King Solomon. If we believe the Old Testament, he was far wiser as a young man than he was grown old. After the very young King Solomon cried, “Oh Lord...I am but a little child. I know not how to go out or come in,” the Lord replied, “Lo, I have given thee a wise and understanding heart.” Then, the young King Solomon made his famous judgment that identified the true mother amongst two women contesting for the right to be the sole parent of an infant. Yet in old age King Solomon was as big a fool as King Lear and an increasingly poor king.

Next, consider wise men who are better documented: Christ, Mohammed, Jefferson, Lincoln, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Shakespeare, Tolstoy. They all reached their pinnacle of wisdom between ages 30 and 50. Indeed, what may be special about wisdom is that, unlike motor skills, sexual prowess, and memory, it does not usually decline with age.

Third, in Lear’s old age his fool admonishes him, “Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise.” Wisdom is the opposite of self-absorption, yet Lear epitomizes the narcissism of a foolish old age when he screams at his child, “Better thou hadst not been born than not t’have pleased me better.” Edgar and Cordelia are wiser by far.

And yet it is hard to believe that wisdom does not increase with time. The longer one lives, the more of the world one has visited and the less parochial one's vision. Anecdotally, presidential advisors Clark Clifford, Bernard Baruch, Henry Kissinger, and General George Marshall were more useful at solving the world's problems after age 55 than before. Once we have learned, we never forget how to ride a bicycle; once we have walked in another's moccasins or traveled a painful road on our own, we never completely forget. If only we could measure it properly, wisdom ought, like experience and gray hair, to increase steadily with age.

Experimental evidence, however, suggests that this belief is not true. For example, one research study found clear development until age 35 in a test that they called "The Mature Reflective Judgment Interview." After that, the investigators found no good evidence for further increases in wisdom. In another study, mid-level managers solved complex social relationship problems as well from 28 to 35 as they did from 45 to 55; the only difference was that the younger managers had to gather more and sometimes quite extraneous data. Performance by managers 65 to 75, however, was clearly inferior. Others have obtained experimental results that confirm these findings.

Paul Baltes, of the Max Planck Institute in Berlin, sums up a lifetime of research on wisdom as follows: "The current evidence is not that the majority of older adults, in areas such as professional expertise and wisdom, demonstrate superior performances when compared to the young."

In our imagination the old are always wiser than us, for you cannot be wise about what you have not lived through. Thus, in one study people of differing ages were asked to nominate wise individuals. If the nominators were in their 20s, the average age of the people nominated as wise was 50. If the nominators were in their 40s, the average age of those they nominated was 55. But if the nominators were over 60, the age of those nominated as wise became 70.

So why do we regard the old as wiser than us whatever age we may be? One reason is that experience really does increase with age. Until we are over 40, most of us don't have the experience to qualify as wise. Judges, baseball managers, high-level diplomats, directors of international organizations—all need decades of seasoning. Indeed, only the old have the experience to view the life span in its fullest context.

Another reason is that consensual recognition of wisdom often occurs only after the passage of time. Cassandra was very wise as a young woman, but it took the villagers a long time to come around. Was not Tolstoy far wiser when he wrote *War and Peace* in his late 30 than when he ran away from his wife, Sonya, to die in a railroad station as a possibly demented and certainly foolish old man? Yet in our memory, Tolstoy is an old man. Gandhi, Thomas Jefferson, and, arguably, Einstein were as wise when they were young men as they were old. Yet, our mind's eye sees Gandhi, Jefferson, and Einstein as old men.

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In the Study of Adult Development, the best pencil-and-paper measure of wisdom was Jane Loevinger's Washington University of St. Louis Sentence

Completion Test (WSCT). In the WSCT, the respondent is asked to complete sentence stems. For example, the sentence stem, “When people are helpless...” could be completed by “I move away” (low score) or “I try to show them how to help themselves” (high score). Adults score higher than adolescents, and achieving 16-year-old adolescents score higher than 18-year-old delinquent adolescents. The test is thought to measure interpersonal sensitivity, discrimination of emotional states, moral maturity, and tolerance of ambiguity. But even though the Harvard men’s WSCTs were scored by Loewinger’s group, their WSCT failed to correlate with maturity of defenses. In addition, for both the Harvard and the inner-city cohorts, high WSCT scores—reflecting several facets of wisdom—failed to predict successful aging. This negative finding reaffirmed a basic finding of the study: it is what people do, not what they say or write, that predicts the future. In one of the few existing prospective studies of wisdom development, Ravenna Helson and Paul Wink found that what they measured as “wisdom” through pencil-and-paper tests increased with age between 27 and 52, but what they measured on paper failed to correlate with success at working and loving.

In the Study of Adult Development, a better measure of wisdom was maturity of defenses, which reflected individuals’ behavior, not their words. The distinguished Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick suggested that what all conceptions of wisdom have in common is “what you need to know in order to live well and cope.” Thus, in trying to identify the wisest men in the grant study, I found that I had chosen the generative men with mature defenses. In other words, the deployment of mature defenses and wisdom appear congruent. A Harvard man reflected this point when he defined wisdom as “humanism, sense of history [anticipation], patience [suppression], tolerance and compassion [altruism], and a sense of humor...” (The bracketed words are mine.)

Over time the mature person evolves the ability to tolerate and to hold strong emotion in consciousness. He or she learns to differentiate, to modulate, but never to ignore the passions. In some ways the acquisition of wisdom recapitulates the acquisition of mature defenses outlined in Chapter 2, and I believe that wisdom abounds in most of the successful lives depicted in this book. But, then, as Paul Baltes reminds us, there are as many definitions of wisdom as people trying to measure it.

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Let me close this ambiguous chapter with the admonition that wisdom involves the toleration of ambiguity and paradox. To be wise about wisdom, we need to accept that wisdom does—and wisdom does not—increase with age. Age facilitates a widening social radius and more balanced ways of coping with adversity, but thus far no one can prove that wisdom is greater in old age. Thus, perhaps we are also wise when we keep our discussion of wisdom simple and when we confine ourselves to words of one and two syllables. Winston Churchill, that master of both wise simplicity and simple wisdom, reminds us that “We are all happier in many ways when we are old than when we were young. The young sow wild oats. The old grow sage.”