

Wisdom Isn't What You Think It Is

It's more about listening than talking.

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Morrie Schwartz was a Brandeis sociology professor who died of A.L.S. in 1995. While he was dying, he had a couple of conversations with Ted Koppel on “Nightline” and a bunch with his former student Mitch Albom, who wrote a book, “Tuesdays With Morrie,” which sold over 15 million copies. For a few years, Schwartz was the national epitome of the wise person, the gentle mentor we all long for.

But when you look at Schwartz's piercing insights ... well, they're not that special: “Accept what you are able to do and what you are not able to do.” Schwartz's genius was the quality of attention he brought to life. We all know we're supposed to live in the present and savor the fullness of each passing moment, but Schwartz actually did it — dancing with wild abandon before his diagnosis, being fully present with all those who made the pilgrimage to him after it.

Schwartz recruited Albom to share his quality of attention. He bathed his former student with unconditional positive regard, saw where Albom's life was sliding into workaholism, and nudged him gently back to what he would value when facing his own death.

When I think of the wise people in my own life, they are like that. It's not the life-altering words of wisdom that drop from their lips, it's the way they receive others. Too often the public depictions of wisdom involve remote, elderly sages who you approach with trepidation — and who give the perfect life-altering advice — Yoda, Dumbledore, Solomon. When a group of influential academics sought to define wisdom, they focused on how much knowledge a wise person had accumulated. Wisdom, [they wrote](#), was “an expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life.”

But when wisdom has shown up in my life, it's been less a body of knowledge and more a way of interacting, less the dropping of secret information, more a way of relating that helped me stumble to my own realizations.

Wisdom is different from knowledge. Montaigne pointed out you can be knowledgeable with another person's knowledge, but you can't be wise with another person's wisdom. Wisdom has an embodied moral element; out of your own moments of suffering comes a compassionate regard for the frailty of others.

Wise people don't tell us what to do, they start by witnessing our story. They take the anecdotes, rationalizations and episodes we tell, and see us in a noble struggle. They see our narratives both from the inside, as we experience them, and from the outside, as we can't. They see the ways we're navigating the dialectics of life — intimacy versus independence, control versus uncertainty — and understand that our current self is just where we are right now, part of a long continuum of growth.

I have a friend, Kate Bowler, who teaches at Duke and learned at age 35 that she had stage IV cancer. In real life, and on her podcast, "Everything Happens," I have seen her use her story again and again as a platform to let others frame their best story. Her confrontation with early death, and her alternating sad and hilarious responses to it, draws out a kind of candor in others. She models a vulnerability, and a focus on the big issues, and helps people understand where they are now.

People only change after they've felt understood. The really good confidants — the people we go to for wisdom — are more like story editors than sages. They take in your story, accept it, but prod you to reconsider it so you can change your relationship to your past and future. They ask you to clarify what it is you really want, or what baggage you left out of your clean tale. They ask you to probe for the deep problem that underlies the convenient surface problem you've come to them with.

It is this skillful, patient process of walking people to their own conclusions that feels like wisdom; maybe that's why Aristotle called ethics a "social practice."

The knowledge that results is personal and contextual, not a generalization or a maxim that you could put in a book of quotations. Being seen in this way has a tendency to turn down the pressure, offering you some distance from your situation, offering hope.

Wise people like Morrie Schwartz seem impressive in part because they have so much composure and self-awareness. I wonder if they got it by looking at other people. It's easier to make decisions for others than for oneself. Maybe wise people take those third person thinking skills they've developed and apply them to the person in the mirror. Maybe self-awareness is mostly not inner rumination but [seeing yourself as if you were somebody else](#).

We live in an ideological age, which reduces people to public categories — red/blue, Black/white — and pulverizes the personal knowledge I'm talking about here. But we all have the choice to see people as persons, not types. As the educator Parker J. Palmer put it, "the shape of our knowledge becomes the shape of our living."