

## Truth and Wisdom

Opinions, Facts, and Truth. These are not the same. Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom. These most certainly are not the same.

In society today, despite the unprecedented volume of information available at our fingertips, arriving at truth and wisdom has become an ever more formidable and distant objective. Technology steers us to sources that conform to our previous searches, while people have an innate tendency to gravitate toward people and information that confirms their beliefs. According to the American statesman Henry Kissinger, facts and information can lead us to knowledge, but only when we have perspective, an understanding of history, and experience can we translate those facts and information first into knowledge and then into wisdom (Kissinger, 2014). Wisdom and truth are increasingly complex recognitions. So how do we achieve them?

Truth and wisdom are the result of the reflection process; asking questions; and a willingness to learn. They come from experience and weigh the nuance, perspective, and context of facts, information and knowledge to make informed judgments. With wisdom comes a greater appreciation for differences in opinion, the nebulous nature of 'facts', and the variability in 'truths.' 'Experts' may have a great deal of knowledge and information, but leaders are the ones who display wisdom in their judgment and application of that knowledge. And sometimes being a leader means making decisions even in the absence of information, or when information is incomplete, for better or worse, based on perspective, experience, and judgment, i.e. wisdom.

Moving from information to wisdom is a path of growth, greater depth of thought, and more complex cognition; likewise, going from opinion to truth is also a deliberate one requiring greater reflection and discernment. Both are subjective goals: who is to say who has wisdom and what is 'truth' – when the facts may be in question and there are different histories, cultures and values at play? Howard Gardner's *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness* in ED800 raised just that question, but his

intent was not to answer the question ‘what is truth’. Rather, it was to show how the *search for answers* is what differentiates between opinions and facts, or information and knowledge, and wisdom and truth.

‘Searching for answers’ was the core of Gardner’s discussion of the virtues. It was also Cusick’s (2004) mantra behind education in general:

*“...(Education does not) exist apart from the person one is...(it) is the accumulated learning, habits of thought and expression, experience in and participation in common endeavors. It is a way of thinking, looking at, and going about one’s affairs in a consistent and intelligible manner.”* (Cusick, 2004, p. 122)

‘Accumulated learning’ encapsulates how we move toward knowledge and then wisdom, from facts to truth. But as the reflective process demonstrates, these conclusions are never static; they must constantly be tested and reassessed; and if found to be wanting, there must not be any fear of changing what previously had been held to be ‘truth.’ I experienced this evolution many times throughout my Master of Arts in Education (MAED) studies.

### **The Wisdom of Self-Reflection**

In my Future Goals reflection essay, I utilized a quotation that had made its original appearance in my ED800 synthesis essay, that of the ‘pilgrimage’:

*“A journey becomes a pilgrimage as we discover, day by day, that the distance traveled is less important than the experience gained.”* (Ernest Kurtz, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, p.133)

The pilgrimage metaphor likewise reflects the process of moving from opinion and facts to truth, from information and knowledge to wisdom. It can also represent the journey that educators undertake. Searching for truths and wisdom, not only in the academic sense but also about myself, was largely my journey through this program and what it will continue to be. In this program, I gathered large amounts of information that I was able to sift through to distill knowledge, and

which through further reflection became wisdom. There were many opinions and a large volume of facts. Ideas were presented as truths, and it took perspective, discussion, reflection, and time to distill them into truths I could accept or reject. I learned about myself; my beliefs and why I had them; and what they meant. Along the way some previously held 'truths' were jettisoned, others gained new facets, and some newly discovered.

The importance of self-reflection (or reflective process) was imprinted on me early in ED800, in John Dewey's thoughts:

*"Reflection mediates the relationship between experience and learning."*

Self-reflection can focus on external things we are doing, but there is another, deeper layer to this journey: the process of self-discovery (or self-learning) that brings about the more substantive and stable adjustments in thinking and behavior. One aspect of this is motivation: externally imposed goals and objectives will lose their force in difficult times, yet intrinsic motivation toward a greater goal will sustain me through even the most extreme difficulties. To illustrate this point, in KiN855 I pointed toward Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, which was written to describe Frankl's concentration camp experiences. Frankl's idea was that "...life is not primarily a quest for pleasure...or a quest for power...but a quest for meaning." (Frankl, 1959, p.x). To be able to live a life that is about 'meaning' is to have reached a higher level of truth and wisdom about both oneself and also life itself. While none of us has had to face circumstances as horrific as Frankl, the same basic principle holds true: what drives me, what dictates my reaction to life, must come from within.

Throughout my MAED study, I consistently faced my preconceived notions, prejudices, and even core beliefs. These were reinforced by some information and contested in others. While it is very easy (and definitely human nature) to identify materials which support a view one already holds, that does not display wisdom, nor reflect any search for truth. In fact, to explore opinions and research that contravene a person's beliefs, to understand and see their validity, and to be able to

absorb some or all parts of that teaching, is the beginning of wisdom and the search for truth.

Within my core MAED discipline, Educational Administration (EAD), EAD822 (Diverse Students and Families) was my 1<sup>st</sup> wakeup call that an open mind would be essential. Reading the initial assignments, the neoliberal views being espoused appalled and offended me, as they challenged ideas that were part of my identity. I felt they were opinions, not facts and certainly not truth, and felt justified in making my views known to the instructor. At that point, I had my opinions and facts, and a lot of knowledge and information, but not much wisdom. Over the course of that term, the information I was looking at did not change; it was my perspective that did and began to see the different facets to the issues. My 'truth' may not necessarily be yours, but again it is the process that will show whether wisdom was sought or gained.

In the same vein, EAD830, the Racial Achievement Gap, broadened my understanding and upended my ideas on educational inequality. I had come into this program with firm views on where the source of the gap lay – its not racial, its socioeconomic – and even through EAD822 I held to that opinion (actually my 'truth') with evidence from that course to defend it. Yet in this course, I was faced with overwhelming information and facts that, while not clearly establishing that it was a racial issue, demonstrated that the issue was much more complex than my earlier 'knowledge' had admitted. Sometimes, it is engaging in the reflection, and to reach the willingness to listen to and understand different perspectives, that permits a change in mindset. Being able to hear those ideas, and admit that I did not have all the answers and that my perspective may not be the final word, is also a kind of wisdom.

Courses within my Graduate Certificate in Sports Coaching and Leadership (Kinesiology - KIN) studies also required an examination of what is truth and wisdom. KIN857, Positive Youth Development through Sport, looked at the theoretical bases of how sport involvement helps children in all aspects of their life.

Yet while this research is widely accepted and there is a large of store of knowledge that sports and life balance is an important component of children's life development, when push comes to shove, it is ignored. Accepted 'truth' and conventional 'wisdom', especially in many Asian societies, severely diminishes these facts and knowledge. Instead, the focus remains strongly on academics, to the detriment of children's overall development, while societies suffer from the physical, emotional and social issues that getting youth involved in sports helps to address – issues such as physical and mental health and social relationships.

KIN855, Psychosocial Bases of Sport, however, really allowed me to explore the connections between sports and life, in particular motivational forces in a person's life. Having worked with adults and youth facing addiction/alcohol issues, I could immediately identify similar motivational characteristics and the relative power of extrinsic versus intrinsic motivations in their lives, together with both groups' eventual success or failure. In this case, facts and knowledge really mean nothing; one can study addicts and alcoholics and their disease for years yet not really understand it. Experience, bringing the wisdom and truth that came from first-hand interactions and work in this area, enabled me to see their connections. Likewise, getting inside the head of an athlete to find out 'what makes them tick' is complex and imprecise process.

Truth and wisdom came forth in a different light in KIN854, Legal and Administrative Issues in Sport. There are different interpretations of facts; there are legal truths; and my truth may be different from yours. Sometimes wisdom is saying 'I don't know', 'It depends', or taking an action that may not be legally required, but is morally and ethically responsible. There is wisdom in making those decisions that are 'right' while not necessarily obligatory, and being able to see facts and truth from different angles.

I would also be remiss if I did not mention how facts and information uncovered during my TE845 family language heritage project turned a long accepted family 'truth' (myth and lore, actually) on its head. It had always been

accepted fact and 'wisdom' within my family that we were Irish, with a bit of German heritage on my dad's side. Turns out that its more like a 50/50 split, and owing to the diffuse genetic makeup of the Irish ancestors, the Northern European heritage is even more significant in my family history. But showing the power of 'truth', even in the face of this information and facts, my mother continues to hold to her own beliefs. And who am I to question that?

Finally, the importance of self-reflection was a key aspect of my core course ED800, Educational Inquiry, and also one of the key, early themes in KIN855. These courses complemented each other; one in teaching and the other coaching, they cemented the idea of 'self-reflection' as an essential aspect of a teacher's practice and kept this idea at the forefront of my studies. A coach and teacher who engages in reflection gains the breathing space to negotiate opinions, facts, and truths, and to move from information, to knowledge, and finally wisdom. It is the very nature of reflection, if conducted honestly, to bring us closer to truth and wisdom.

Inquiry. Reflection. Pilgrimage. Search. All encompass what my MAED journey represents, more generally as an educator but more broadly in growing as an individual. As Frankl rightly observed, external factors may be beyond our control, but we can control what is inside. Students, athletes, everyone: we experience success when we achieve personal growth. This growth is not measurable numerically, but it is observable to those around us. It exists and it is more lasting and satisfying than external rewards. Wisdom and truth cannot be quantified either, but they too can be seen. The continued striving for truth and wisdom was a core, integral principle in my MAED studies. It is the pursuit of a more enlightened way of thinking and acting, a task that hopefully is never completed.

## References

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