



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Wisdom of Fools”

© by The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. 1 Corinthians 3:19

I wanted to learn, but here I have found only madness. Yet, should [I] seek deep wisdom elsewhere, [I] may not find it. Islamic Sufi Wisdom

A fool thinks himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool.
William Shakespeare, ‘As You Like It’

Who are a little wise the best fools be. John Donne

Sermon

It seems wise to begin my remarks this morning with the words of a great teacher of wisdom. Confucius said, “For one word a man is often deemed to be wise, and for one word he is often deemed to be foolish. We should be careful indeed what we say.”

At the risk of being a fool I offer you several words this morning. I hope to entertain you but mostly to challenge you to look inward and reflect as the Hodja Nasruddin would have you do. Like the medieval fool, I am capable of turning somersaults and handsprings and I do juggle many proverbial balls, but today I only hope to turn conventional wisdom on its head.

When you imagine someone wise you probably don’t imagine a fool. An older person, serious, knowledgeable, steady and calm, and possibly a loner on a mountaintop may be what you imagine. Maybe you picture Bilbo’s Gandalf or Harry Potter’s Dumbledore with flowing robes and long gray beards. Maybe you picture an old crone, a wise woman living alone, knowledgeable about healing arts and love potions. These images make sense given that the words *wizard*, *wise*, *magician* and *magic* all share a common linguistic root. The Three Wise Men were Magi.

A wise fool may sound nonsensical, yet throughout history and across cultures and religious traditions, they abound. The Hodja Nasruddin character is well-loved across Turkey and much of the Islamic world. As a Sufi mystic teacher, his stories still invite us to pay attention to the wisdom that lies within ourselves. His foolishness also provides a non-threatening method to deliver advice you might not want to hear.

Medieval jesters also used satire and humor to tell truth or wisdom. When men of the court refused to risk a monarch’s displeasure, the fool could voice contrary ideas and allow truth to be

spoken. If a King or Queen didn't like what was said, it could be easily dismissed. After all, who takes a fool seriously?

Biblical prophets also spoke truth to power—and many acted foolishly according to the conventional wisdom of their day. Hosea did the unthinkable by marrying Gomer, the local prostitute, to symbolize Israel's ungodly allegiance to false gods and earthly kings. King Solomon suggested a crazy solution to end a dispute over the identity of an infant's mother. He offered to cut the baby in two and give each woman half a baby. In Jewish tradition, the fools of Chelm hold deep meaning in their seemingly silly stories.

In China, Confucius was dismissed by most of his contemporaries as a wrong-headed fool. In his lifetime, few listened to his advice for how to improve civil society. His final years were spent in poverty, wandering the country looking for a means of support. In his own mind he died a failure, his life a foolish waste.

In India, the Prince Siddhartha was considered foolish by his contemporaries for rejecting his birthright of wealth and power. Instead he renounced all possessions and endured harsh self-discipline and physical denial. But in time Siddhartha realized asceticism was no better a route to happiness and enlightenment than life as a wealthy prince. When he rejected their path, too, the ascetics derided him for being weak in body and spirit and for foolishly denying their path. Buddha's insight and wisdom led him to a middle way. Today, despite Zen Buddhism's popularity, many misunderstand its techniques and consider *koans* inscrutable, foolish riddles.

In ancient Athens, Socrates died at the hand of the state for seeking wisdom and challenging the powerful. Through his questions Socrates revealed the foolishness of those who thought themselves wise. Socrates believed the only true wisdom was knowing that you know nothing.

In Native American traditions, Coyote, Raven, and other tricksters act the fool while teaching wisdom. In African traditions, the spider Anansi and the tortoise Ijapa impart wisdom through their foolish exploits.

For Christians, Jesus is the ultimate fool. Jesus, a child born in poverty, is called a king whom wealthy, wise kings bow down to. This King with a crown of thorns dies on a wooden post, a symbolic tree which in those days was the most disgraceful way to die.

More foolish was Jesus' message. He told people to give up everything they thought they knew, give up their wealth, their families, and their old ways. And he advised they love your enemies, and do as he did--touch lepers, and invite the poor and powerless to sit at your table. Jesus turned the tables upside down in the temples. He taught you would not enter God's kingdom, whether on earth or in heaven, until you gave up all your conventional wisdom. No wonder he was a threat, no wonder he was killed. No wonder the apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to the early church in Corinth, "Conventional wisdom is foolishness to God."

Mohandas Gandhi was imprisoned and rejected by many who found his method of non-violence foolish. Many activists in Martin Luther King's day considered his belief in non-violence impotent and foolish. He too was killed for teaching against the prevailing, dominant culture.

Those who speak or act against cultural norms take great risks. No wonder wisdom's truths are delivered by those who adopt a mask of foolishness or are deemed foolish by those who stand to lose from their wisdom.

Why is worldly wisdom foolish and contrary to all these sages? Author Stephen S. Hall in his book *Wisdom: from Philosophy to Neuroscience*, suggests an answer. Wisdom, he believes, is a magical mix of cognitive, emotional and reflective elements. *Cognitive* refers to our ability to make use of experiential knowledge. This is what we learn by living and encompasses more than knowing facts and figures. *Emotional* refers to our ability to control or regulate our feelings and emotional responses to situations. This means not being ruled by emotions, but recognizing emotions inform life. *Reflective* refers to our ability to distance ourselves from a situation and discern an appropriate action. This means seeing the bigger picture, the needs of the whole, not just our own desires.

It is this last reflective ability of wise people which makes their message controversial. When we see and weigh the needs of the world over our own personal satisfactions, we resist. It seems counter to our own happiness, our own security, and that makes it difficult wisdom to follow.

But if we learn to react less emotionally, reflect on the big picture that includes other people's needs, and learn from our life experience, we will be happier and have a more meaningful life. We value attaining wisdom so that our lives will be better. We want to discern or understand what is of ultimate value to us and this is what we do here, in this religious and spiritual community. Worship is all about exploring what we hold to be of ultimate worth—our God, if you like.

If we accept that wisdom can't be learned from a book, despite the many self-help guides on the shelves in libraries or for sale on Amazon.com, it also means you can't get it from me, either, though I can advise you, based on my own wisdom, feeble or foolish as it may be. A better teacher is your own experience, especially the adversity you face.

Friedrich Nietzsche said, "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger." I add, it also makes us wiser. My personal experiences with breast cancer taught me how to be a better pastor when you face life-threatening illnesses. As a daughter whose mother has died, I better understand your grief and loss. As a parent I understand the trials of loving someone you can't control, who needs to learn through their own experiences. My ministerial training helps me be less controlled by my emotions so that I can be more fully present with you. The act of writing sermons is one of my spiritual practices of reflection. Discussing our differing perspectives and values contributes to my being better able to consider your needs. Your similar experiences teach you this same wisdom.

As Unitarian Universalists, we encourage each other to reflect on and share our personal experiences and learn from them. These include our Small Group Ministry meetings, lay members speaking on Sunday morning, dinner groups, teaching classes, and playing together. These activities and opportunities here help you learn and grow and become wiser—maybe even foolish.

Our Fourth Unitarian Universalist Principle affirms you must walk your own path to truth and meaning, i.e. wisdom. This fourth principle rests upon our First and Seventh Principles. We must balance these two: the First, an individual's needs and worth, balanced against the larger needs and worth of the Seventh, the interdependent web we are a part of.

You may think I'm foolish, but I think our pride in UU individualism may be among our greatest weaknesses. If individualism were our highest value and the good of the whole a lesser value, I believe our values would be upside-down. We are members of a community who covenant to be together because of our shared values. But to be the beloved community individualism cannot be our idol, our god.

Because we are a community and connected, I encourage you to attend one of the Committee on Shared Ministry's upcoming sessions to discuss our covenant. A covenant speaks to our relational values, how we want to be when we come together to transform lives, our mission's bottom line. The purpose of these discussions is to give you a chance to share with each other what you value most, to learn from each other and get to know each other more deeply through this sharing. Eventually these discussions will produce a covenant for the Fellowship that expresses your common values—but the conversations are as important, if not more so, than any end product. So please look at your announcements and pick a date to attend. Be wise, participate.

Unlike facts and figures, wisdom can't be learned by memorizing proverbs or following every self-help guru. As your minister, your prophet and fool, I can only hope and pray that you will experience the truth Martin Luther King taught by naming us brothers and sisters, that Jesus taught by naming us all neighbors, and that the wise Obi Wan Kenobi in 'Star Wars' taught by claiming the Force, the energy field created by all living things which surrounds and penetrates us, binds us together with the entire galaxy. In this, they share the single, most common wisdom of all times and places: we are one. And because we are the priesthood and the prophethood of all believers, we must also be the foolhood of all believers. Risk being a fool.

I could say more, but that would be foolish. So I close with some of Buddha's perhaps foolish wisdom:

Believe nothing merely because you have been told it.

Do not believe what your teacher tells you
merely out of respect for the teacher.

But whatever, after due examination and analysis,
you find to be kind, conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings –
that doctrine believe and cling to, and take it as your guide.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Who are the wise people in your life? What makes them wise?
2. Share a time you felt wise or acted wisely. What made it seem wise?
3. Was there a time you felt wise but others thought you foolish? How did that feel?
4. What is the most important guiding wisdom you try to follow? What is easy or hard about this?

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