

Spiritual Wellness: Finding Wisdom in Everyday Life

By Jim Concotelli, Ph.D., Horizon Bay VP of resident programs



When asked to define wisdom, it is said Socrates just shrugged. He was not sure he could find it, whatever it was, either in him self or in any of his fellow citizens. The news from Monika Ardelt is more encouraging. Yes, she reports, wisdom is alive and well and, in fact, you can catch glimpses of it in everyday life.

Many scholars seek wisdom in folklore, ancient texts and the spiritual visionaries of the ages like Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tzu, Abraham, Muhammad and Jesus. Ardelt, a University of Florida sociologist, bypassed this group of historical figures searching instead among ordinary souls by visiting churches, social groups and retirement communities. Here, she discovered wisdom among scores of older adults.

Ardelt decided to find out what strategies older adults use when confronted with the hardships and obstacles of life. She asked volunteers to take a questionnaire that was designed to gauge how each individual scored on a "wisdom" scale, based on qualities most often associated with that virtue: selflessness, compassion, objectivity, flexibility and a deep understanding of life and human nature.

She found wisdom in a 77-year-old retired school administrator who learned, over his lifetime, to see problems as games, meant to be played out rather than feared. She found wisdom in an 85-year-old homemaker who lived by the creed: "Do whatever has to be done, whether you want to do it or not." The strategy served her well most recently to get through painful rehab from two knee operations, succeeding where others often failed, eventually ditching both her walker and her cane in favor of her own two feet. Ardelt found wisdom in a 59-year-old woman with only ten years of education who, in the middle of a hurricane, pretended to fall asleep in order to calm her children. "Somebody had to stay cool," the woman explained.

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What Ardelt quickly realized was that wise elders tended to use three main strategies in dealing with difficulties. They distanced themselves from a crisis so it would not overpower them, taking a step backward to calm themselves, to become, as the one respondent phrased it, the "cool" one. They did what they could to actively cope with a challenge, working hard at rehab after a knee operation, for example, rather than giving in to self-pity and pain. And when a crisis arose in their lives, they applied their own personal codes, or "life lessons," such as never giving in to an outside force, or always doing what needs to be done.

Although wisdom may be an elusive concept, it is alive and well today in the ways each of us face the challenges presented to us. As we look for ways to cope with life's unexpected changes, we can focus on the inner wisdom that has guided us throughout our lives. These components of wisdom are the foundation of our spiritual wellness: compassion, flexibility, acceptance, open-mindedness and contentment. These aspects of wisdom can provide the insight and support we need to move forward and enjoy everyday life to the fullest.