

GOALS, VALUES, AND WISDOM: UNSOLICITED ADVICE TO YOUNG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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What would you most like to have by the time you reach 30? In these economic tough times you might say “a really good job.” Or you might opt for “a good marriage.” Few of you would say “wisdom.” Even if religious you would probably not take too seriously the words offered in many religions such as those in the Jewish *Bible* (or Christian *Old Testament*): “Wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared with it.” If you have taken a philosophy course, it might have given you some appreciation for wisdom. But maybe not, even though “philosophy” is derived from two Greek words meaning the love of wisdom. As young college students you can hardly be blamed for overlooking the importance of wisdom, for (as I have stressed [elsewhere](#)) it is not very valued in our consumer, media-driven culture. As U. S. humorist Dave Barry once said about our television programming: “[its] message has always been that the need for truth, wisdom and world peace pales by comparison with the need for a toothpaste that offers whiter teeth and fresher breath.”

College years can bring plenty of stress from earning enough money for all the expenses to grade pressures. Acceptance by your peers is often important to you, and you may still be in the midst of what Erik Erikson has labeled an “identity crisis.” Moreover, during these years you have to make some important decisions, like what major to choose. By the time you graduate, you might have determined what career to pursue. You may even have decided whom you wish to marry. What, you might ask, has all this to do with wisdom?

The Oxford English Dictionary (2d ed., 1989) tells us that it is “the capacity for judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends.” Since you need to decide some important questions, wouldn’t it be helpful if you could do so wisely? Too many of us who are older have seen the sad, sometimes even tragic, results that have followed because of bad youthful judgments or decisions like choosing the wrong career or marriage partner.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that “the only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.” If this is only half true, isn’t it important then to decide wisely what you wish to do with your life? Emerson also said that “the purpose of life . . . is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.” Aren’t these at least words you should consider?

In a 1977 book, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, sixty-five-year-old economist and environmentalist E. F. Schumacher mentioned the difficulties he faced trying to discover how best to live. On the first page of his book he wrote: “All through school and university [in Europe and the USA] I had been given maps of life and knowledge on which there was hardly a trace of many of the things that I most cared about and that seemed to me to be of the greatest possible importance to the conduct of my life.” These “maps” he referred to were those furnished by the modern materialistic culture that he grew up in that left “all of the questions that really matter unanswered.” He went on to note that the situation was “even worse” by 1977. He then pointed out how difficult it was for humans to learn how to live properly.

Not only are they utterly helpless when they are born and remain so for a long time; even when fully grown, they do not move and act with the sure-footedness of animals. They hesitate, doubt, change their minds, run hither and thither, uncertain not simply of how to get what they want but above all of *what* they want.

Questions like "What should I do?" . . . are strange questions because they relate to *ends*, not simply to means. No technical answer will do, such as "Tell me precisely what you want and I shall tell you how to get it." The whole point is that I do not know what I want. Maybe all I want is to be happy. But the answer "Tell me what you need for happiness, and I shall then be able to advise you what to do"--this answer, again, will not do, because I do not know what I need for happiness. Perhaps someone says: "For happiness you need wisdom"-- but what is wisdom? Or: "For happiness you need the truth that makes you free"-- but what is the truth that makes us free? Who will tell me where I can find it? Who can guide me to it or at least point out the direction in which I have to proceed?

More recently Copthorne Macdonald, founder and editor of *The Wisdom Page*, has [written](#) that "wisdom, maturity, and happiness seem to go hand in hand with figuring out how life and the world work--with discovering the nature of the rules, laws, and programming that dictate what will happen under what conditions. Wise people know that the more deeply and accurately they come to understand key processes within and without, the better able they are to live their personal lives in harmony with what is happening moment-to-moment. Wise people want to find out. Wise people are reality seekers."

In a new book called *How to Achieve a Heaven on Earth*, which contains 101 essays by influential people including President Obama, Macdonald has an essay entitled "[The Centrality of Wisdom](#)," and in it he writes that "values are at the heart of the matter." He quotes a famous neuropsychologist who wrote that "human value priorities . . . stand out as the most strategically powerful causal control now shaping world events. More than any other causal system with which science now concerns itself, it is variables in human value systems that will determine the future." Macdonald recommends "wisdom-associated values such as empathy, truth, honesty, justice, cooperation, peace, compassion, universal well-being, creativity, and comprehensive knowledge." (See also his wisdom values list at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html>.)

Thus, as the Oxford dictionary, Schumacher, and Macdonald all suggest or emphasize, for judgments to be wise ones they should be linked with important *ends*, with the highest values. A first task, therefore, is to choose positive values. Many of you already possess some such values as evidenced by your concern for the environment, for charitable causes such as gathering relief for Haitians after their recent earthquake, or by planning for careers directed at helping others. Some of you come to such values by following your parents' example or by being influenced by your religious beliefs, for most religions teach positive values like the golden rule of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But parents and religions, of course, don't always act in positive ways. By their words and actions they sometimes exhibit negative traits like intolerance. Moreover, as suggested earlier, our consumer, celebrity-driven media culture does not do much to encourage wisdom. And in hard economic times like these it is understandable if many of you are more concerned with your economic future than with wisdom.

But you ignore gaining wisdom at your peril, and there is no reason why you can't become wiser. Although it may be more likely to find wisdom among older people--though many of us are not very wise--younger people can also increase their wisdom. As Macdonald has noted, "none of us is totally wise or totally unwise," and "we now know that wisdom can be developed intentionally." A good place to start is by going to [The Wisdom Page](#). There, on its home page, you can find links to valuable materials, including a nine-minute video, "[Wisdom and the Wisdom Page](#)." This video, including its helpful visuals, addresses clearly three

questions: What Is Wisdom? Why Is Wisdom Important? How Can We Develop Wisdom? The home page also contains links to such topics as “Education for Wisdom” and “Wisdom Development.” To take just one example, there is a [link](#) under the first topic to an article by Robert Sternberg, “It’s Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom.” [Sternberg](#) is one of the world’s most highly esteemed wisdom researchers.

In this 2002 essay, he writes of a program he and others established at Yale University to teach pre-college students to think wisely. Like Schumacher and Macdonald, he stresses the importance of values--“our goal is not to teach values but to help children develop positive values of their own that promote social welfare.” He insists that “teaching for wisdom recognizes that there are certain values--honesty, sincerity, doing toward others as you would have them do toward you--that are shared the world over by the great ethical systems of many cultures.” (For a great overview of global values, see the [World Values Survey site](#), especially its Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map of the World.) Sternberg believes that “people are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God.” Another important goal is to teach students to see “things from others' perspectives as well as one's own,” to tolerate “other people's points of view, whether or not one agrees with such views.”

Unlike many educational programs, this one stresses not so much “the acquisition of knowledge but . . . how such knowledge will be used.” Sternberg maintains that “teaching for wisdom can be made part of any subject matter, because wisdom is a way of looking at the world, a vision that we have seen in such leaders as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela.”

During more than four decades of college and university teaching I often heard students complain about courses they had to take in such fields as history, literature, and philosophy. But if taught and learned well, they can help develop wisdom. Two works of literature you might read in an introductory college literature course serve as an example. One is a novella, the other a play. Both provide great insight on what can occur if you fail to become wiser.

The novella is [The Death of Ivan Ilyich](#) by Russia’s great writer Leo Tolstoy. It tells the story of an ambitious lawyer who became a judge. Obsessed with his career, getting ahead, and material goods, he is not a good father or husband, or sensitive or caring about the needs of others. Two years before his death he had “debts he had contracted by living beyond his means.” But then he received a promotion, moved to a new town, and found a spacious house for his family, which he redecorated. Tolstoy tells us that he “superintended the arrangements, chose the wallpapers, supplemented the furniture . . . and supervised the upholstering. Everything progressed and progressed and approached the ideal he had set himself.” But Tolstoy adds that “in reality it [the house] was just what is usually seen in the houses of people of moderate means who want to appear rich, and therefore succeed only in resembling others like themselves: there are damasks, dark wood, plants, rugs, and dull and polished bronzes--all the things people of a certain class have in order to resemble other people of that class.”

But then Ivan gets fatally ill, apparently from cancer, and realizes that he has not long to live. The question then occurs to him: "What if my whole life has been wrong?" What if “he had not spent his life as he should have done”? He realizes that “his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests, might all have been false.” But Tolstoy ends his story on a positive note. Ivan repents his wasted life.

This occurred at the end of the third day, two hours before his death. Just then his schoolboy son had crept softly in and gone up to the bedside. . . .

At that very moment Ivan Ilyich fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified. . . . Then he felt that someone was kissing his hand. He opened his eyes, looked at his son, and felt sorry for him. His wife came up to him and he glanced at her. She was gazing at him open-mouthed, with undried tears on her nose and cheek and a despairing look on her face. He felt sorry for her too.

Before taking his final breath, he tries to express his sorrow for his past behavior toward his son and wife. Although Tolstoy has Ivan repenting before his death, we still are lead to think how sad it would be to lead almost your entire adult life unwisely, in the wrong way.

The play you might read in a college course is *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller. Because of our celebrity-obsessed culture, older Americans are more likely to have heard of him as one of the husbands of the most famous actress of her day, Marilyn Monroe, than to have seen or read this drama. But it still became one of the most performed plays in the world and the basis of several film or TV versions. It provides American students even more to think about than Tolstoy's novella because it is set within an American setting. In a 1998 [essay](#), writer Joyce Carol Oates declared that "nearly fifty years after its composition, *Death of a Salesman* strikes us as the most achingly contemporary of our classic American plays. . . . As we near the twenty-first century, it seems evident that America has become an ever more frantic, self-mesmerized world of salesmanship, image without substance, empty advertising rhetoric, and that peculiar product of our consumer culture "public relations"--a synonym for hypocrisy, deceit, fraud." Today, still reeling from an economic crisis preceded by greed and the likes of swindler Bernie Madoff, Miller's play seems even more relevant.

It is about Willy Loman, his wife Linda, and their two sons, Biff and Happy, both in their early thirties. It is set mainly in the late 1940s in their Brooklyn house, where the two sons have temporarily joined their parents, but there are also frequent flashbacks. Willie has worked as a travelling salesman for the same company for three and a half decades; but, now in his sixties and no longer an effective salesman, he is fired. His neighbor Charley offers him a job, but Willy is too proud to take it. Not long afterward, he commits suicide.

In the play's last scene, "Requim," his son Biff says about him: "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong," and "he never knew who he was." And Biff is right. Willy is not an evil man; his suicide is motivated not only by his sense of failure and despair, but by the hope that his insurance policy will help his family. He says to Charley, "You end up worth more dead than alive." But Willy has unwise goals and values and little insight into his own character. He tells us that he became a salesman when he "realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want." He thought that through sales he could earn a good income and gain the love and respect he desired. Yet, although earning money is necessary, Willy's values, to be a "success" and to be well thought of, do not reflect any of the wisdom-associated values mentioned above such as "empathy, truth, honesty, justice, cooperation, peace, compassion, universal well-being, creativity, and comprehensive knowledge."

To a large extent Willy's tragedy stems from his lack of insight and self-knowledge and his failure to mature, but his character is completely believable. Willy tells his young boss that 1928 was a "big year" for him, one in which he "averaged a hundred and seventy dollars a week in commissions." Although not related in the play, this was the final year before the beginning of the Great Depression. The 1920s were a decade in which Metropolitan Insurance put out a pamphlet, *Moses Persuader of Men*, extolling Moses as "one of the greatest salesmen and real-estate promoters that ever lived." A book called *The Man Nobody Knows* stated that Jesus was a

great business executive, “the founder of modern business,” and that his parables were “the most powerful advertisements of all time.” In 1925-1926 this book topped the non-fiction best-seller list. By 1928 (like 2008), partly prompted by advertising and salesmen, many Americans were spending beyond their means and making reckless investments. Like them, Willy wants what the consumer society of his day has to offer and is often in debt pursuing this part of the American dream. Early in the play, we see that he and Linda once had trouble making their installment payments on a new refrigerator, a washing machine, and a vacuum cleaner, as well as paying for roof and car expenses. Not long before Willy’s suicide, he and Linda discuss the one final payment that they have to make on an old refrigerator that just broken down again. Willy complains that they should have bought a better-advertised refrigerator rather than the little known brand they did. He then laments:

Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it’s broken! I’m always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it’s on its last legs. The refrigerator consumes belts like a goddam maniac. They time those things. They time them so when you finally paid for them, they’re used up.

In his personal life, Willy’s goals, values, and behavior also reflect a lack of wisdom. Although Linda is a loving wife, Willy is unfaithful to her with at least one woman. In Boston he had a sexual relationship with one of the secretaries of a company that he sold to--she says to him at one point, “You are the saddest, self-centeredest soul I ever did see-saw.” His son Biff’s discovery of the affair when he was a senior in high school has tragic consequences for Biff and contributes to his failing to graduate.

Biff was a football star and Willy had great hopes for him, including a college scholarship. It is evident, however, that Biff’s high school fame is a great boost to Willy’s insecure ego--Willy often brags about how important and liked he is, telling his boys that he has friends all over New England, but confesses to Linda that “people don’t seem to take to me. . . . They seem to laugh at me.” And he tells neighbor Charley that he is his only friend. Charley’s son is the nerdish Bernard, who is Biff’s age and his source for cheating in school, which Willy condones. Willy’s attitude toward young people like Bernard is captured well when he tells Biff and Happy:

Bernard can get the best marks in school, y’understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y’understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That’s why I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer.

Late in the play, however, when Willy’s sons are in their thirties, Bernard is a lawyer preparing to argue a case before the Supreme Court. Neither Biff nor Happy are content or successful. Although both sons have long been womanizers, neither is married. Biff drifts from job to job and was even in jail for a while for stealing a suit in Kansas City. Toward the end of the drama, Biff finally seems to realize that he, Happy, and Willy have all been deceiving themselves and pursuing false dreams. He says to Willie: “We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!” And he faults Willy for his fate--“I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air I could never stand taking orders from anybody!”

Happy’s fate is not much better. He is “one of the two assistants to the assistant” buyer in a store. Early in the play he tells Biff: “All I can do now is wait for the merchandise manager to

die. . . . I don't know what the hell I'm workin' for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment--all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely." He also confesses: "Sometimes I want to just rip my clothes off in the middle of the store and outbox that goddam merchandise manager. I mean I can outbox, outrun, and outlift anybody in that store, and I have to take orders from those common, petty sons-of-bitches till I can't stand it any more." He sounds like Willy when he tells Biff, "I gotta show some of those pompous, self-important executives over there that Hap Loman can make the grade." Partly to get his revenge on some of them, he talks some of their girl friends into having affairs with him, bragging to Biff that he can get girls any time he wishes. He also occasionally takes bribes from manufactures for steering orders their way. At the end of the play, he's still as clueless as Willie was and says: "I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have--to come out number-one man."

As college students, you can consider the fates of Ivan Ilyich and Willy Loman and his sons as warnings, like that in [Act II](#) of Shakespeare's "The Tempest":

If of life you keep a care,
Shake off slumber, and beware.
Awake, Awake!

Beware of leading an unexamined life, of being a slave to convention, advertisers, or public opinion, of being too self-centered, of pursuing materialist dreams. Awake to the importance of empathy, truth, honesty, justice, peace, beauty, compassion, humility, tolerance, and a passion for life and its wonders. Don't pursue unwise dreams that could lead to the despair of a Willy Loman. Don't waste all your life, or like Ivan Ilyich almost all of it, pursuing false idols like money, fame, or recognition. Awake to the possibilities before you. You are still young and college offers you a wonderful opportunity to get your life off on the right track. Seek out professors who are enthusiastic about their subject. Take courses like philosophy and comparative religion that will help you to examine and reflect upon values, or psychology that will give you greater insight into yourselves and others. Take courses in literature, music, and art that will help you appreciate beauty more. Take courses in history, foreign languages, geography, and political science that will help you overcome cultural provincialism and appreciate other cultures. Take courses in the sciences like physics or ecology that will enable you to better understand the importance of a scientific approach to truth or what is needed for humans to live in harmony with the rest of creation.

All of these courses can help you to integrate what Macdonald [suggests](#) is necessary for leading a wise life: "the three great value spheres" of "the Good, the True, and the Beautiful" or those of "morals, science, and art." These courses will help you better balance your life and (to paraphrase Sternberg) contribute to the greater good by balancing your own interests with those of others and larger entities, like your school, your community, your country, the planet, and future generations.

About the time of his inauguration in January 2009, President Obama was asked to comment on what he wanted for his two daughters. He [responded](#) in a letter to his daughters in *Parade* magazine by first saying, "When I was young I thought life was all about me--about how I'd make my way in the world, become successful, and get the things I want." Sound like Ivan Ilyich or Willy Loman and his two sons? But then as Obama became a family man he

became wiser, and already as a presidential candidate in 2008 [he showed signs](#) of being someone who valued wisdom. In his *Parade* letter he says: “I want all our children to go to schools worthy of their potential--schools that challenge them, inspire them, and instill in them a sense of wonder about the world around them. I want them to have the chance to go to college--even if their parents aren't rich. And I want them to get good jobs: jobs that pay well and give them benefits like health care, jobs that let them spend time with their own kids and retire with dignity.” But he also wanted more for children. He told his daughters that “it is only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you will realize your true potential.” And he added: “These are the things I want for you--to grow up in a world with no limits on your dreams and no achievements beyond your reach, and to grow into compassionate, committed women who will help build that world.”

As young college students today, Obama's advice is far better for you than that Willy Loman gave to his sons. He overemphasized sports and popularity and ignored the importance of education. But Willy's own father abandoned him when was very young. And Willy, like many hard-working people of his generation, never received a higher education, and with it a golden opportunity to begin adult life with wiser goals and values than he did. After college you may start a family, buy a home, raise kids, and deal with job problems, economic ups and downs, and environmental and global challenges that may impact your life. Technology will continue its rapid advance, providing new opportunities, but also temptations and threats. You will be busy, sometimes it may seem frantically so, but also have leisure-time choices your parents never had. If you hope to lead a happy, worthwhile life, and avoid the pitfalls that ensnared Ivan Ilyich and Willy Loman, you will need some wisdom.