

Portraits of Modern Wisdom: An Introduction

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“The Wisdom of Carl and Paula Sandburg” is the first of a series of essays intended eventually for print publication with the tentative book title *Portraits of Modern Wisdom*. The German historian Wilhelm Dilthey once wrote: "How can one deny that biography is of outstanding significance for the understanding of the great context of the historical world?" Psychologist Abraham Maslow noted that to gain greater insight into wisdom it would be helpful to study public and historical figures such as Jefferson, Einstein, and Schweitzer. It therefore seems likely that biographical portraits, highlighting wise behavior, could contribute significantly to a better understanding of wisdom in modern times. In my portraits, after an introductory chapter, I intend to examine the wisdom of individuals from various modern cultures, professions, and decades. Among some of those I have thought of are Martin Buber, Anton Chekhov, Eric and Joan Ericson, Carlos Fuentes, Herman Hesse, Nikos Kazantzakis, Doris Lessing, Nelson Mandela, Gabriel Marcel, Eleanor Roosevelt, Andrei Sakharov, E. F. Schumacher, Rabindranath Tagore, and Studs Terkel. But how many of these individuals I actually profile remains uncertain, depending on a future that I cannot control. And perhaps others interested in writing “wisdom profiles,” and who have perhaps already done more research on some of the individuals mentioned above, or on others, will care to join me, and we can make *Portraits of Modern Wisdom* a collaborative effort, with at least some of the profiles appearing on The Wisdom Page. Such portraits will, I think, demonstrate how wisdom operates in real life, in an existential context.

In his novel *Immortality* (1990), Milan Kundera wrote:

Imagology is stronger than reality, which has anyway long ceased to be what it was for my grandmother, who lived in a Moravian village and still knew everything through her own experience: how bread is baked, how a house is built, how a pig is slaughtered and the meat smoked, what quilts are made of, what the priest and the schoolteacher think about the world; she met the whole village every day. . . she had, so to speak, personal control over reality, and nobody could fool her by maintaining that Moravian agriculture was thriving when people at home had nothing to eat. My Paris neighbor spends his time in an office, where he sits for eight hours facing an office colleague, then he sits in his car and drives home, turns on the TV, and when the announcer informs him that in the latest public opinion poll the majority of Frenchmen voted their country the safest in Europe . . . he is overjoyed and opens a bottle of champagne without ever learning that three thefts and two murders were committed on his street that very day. . . .For contemporary man reality is a continent visited less and less often.”¹

By imagology Kundera means the pseudo reality created by image makers: “advertising agencies; political campaign managers; designers who devise the shape of everything from cars

¹ *Immortality*, trans. Peter Kussi (New York, 1992), 114-15.

to gym equipment; fashion stylists; barbers; show-business stars dictating the norms of physical beauty that all branches of imagology obey.”²

His contrast of his grandmother’s life early in the twentieth century with those of his Paris neighbor toward the end of the century reminds us that they lived in two very different environments. The skills and abilities to live wisely in one might not suffice to do so in the other. And the exercise of wisdom is not only affected by place and time, but also by many other concrete circumstances such as one’s race, gender, and profession.

In other works, I have touched on the lack of regard for wisdom in modern times and the need for it now more than ever--the new U. S. president Barack Obama, however, offers some hope that he and his administration will value wisdom more highly than did his predecessor.³

The Oxford English Dictionary (2d ed., 1989) defines wisdom as “the capacity for judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends.” One scholar notes that “wisdom is not just about maximizing one's own or someone else's self-interest, but about balancing various self-interests (intrapersonal) with the interests of others (interpersonal) and of other aspects of the context in which one lives (extrapersonal), such as one’s city or country or environment or even God. Wisdom also involves creativity, in that the wise solution to a problem may be far from obvious.”⁴ In other words, to be wise in the fullest sense of the term one has to be so in regard to one’s personal life (one’s work, one’s leisure), family, friends, environment, and community, whether local, national or, international. Wisdom involves “thinking, feeling, and acting.”⁵

Another scholar has written that “seven properties are generally, if not universally, accepted as inherent in any definition of wisdom.” Here is his list:

- (1) Wisdom addresses important and difficult questions and strategies about the conduct and meaning of life.
- (2) Wisdom includes knowledge about the limits of knowledge and the uncertainties of the world.
- (3) Wisdom represents a truly superior level of knowledge, judgment, and advice.
- (4) Wisdom constitutes knowledge with extraordinary scope, depth, and balance.
- (5) Wisdom involves a perfect synergy of mind and character, that is, an orchestration of knowledge and virtues.
- (6) Wisdom represents knowledge used for the good or well-being of oneself and that of others.
- (7) Wisdom, though difficult to achieve and to specify, is easily recognized when manifested.⁶

Still another scholar, Copthorne Macdonald, says that wisdom involves:

² Ibid., 114.

³ See my “Excerpt from *An Age of Progress? Clashing Twentieth-Century Global Forces* (Anthem Press, 2008), 263-66,” at <http://www.wisdompage.com/MossOnWisdom.html>; and my “Obama, McCain, Bush, Age, Experience, and Wisdom,” August 25, 2008, at <http://hnn.us/articles/52853.html>.

⁴ Robert J. Sternberg, *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152.

⁵ James Birren and Laurel Fisher, “The Elements of Wisdom: Overview and Integration,” *Wisdom: Its Nature, Origins, and Development*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 323.

⁶ Paul Baltes, “Wisdom as Orchestration of Mind and Virtue,” 2004, http://library.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/ft/pb/PB_Wisdom_2004.pdf (accessed December 23, 2008), 17.

- seeing things clearly; seeing things as they are
- acting in prudent and effective ways
- acting with the well-being of the whole in mind
- deeply understanding the human/cosmic situation
- knowing when to act and when not to act
- being able to handle whatever arises with peace of mind and an effective, compassionate, holistic response
- being able to anticipate potential problems and avoid them.

Macdonald has also acknowledged his debt to Maslow and believes that his “writings tell us much about the nature of wisdom.” Maslow's wise people, his self-actualizers, “focused on concerns outside of themselves; they liked solitude and privacy more than the average person, and they tended to be more detached than ordinary from the dictates and expectations of their culture. They were inner-directed people. They were creative, too, and appreciated the world around them with a sense of awe and wonder. In love relationships they respected the other's individuality and felt joy at the other's successes. They gave more love than most people, and needed less. Central to their lives was a set of values that Maslow called the Being-Values, or B-Values: wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, richness, simplicity, beauty, goodness, uniqueness, effortlessness, playfulness, truth, honesty, reality, self-sufficiency.”⁷

Although wise people are better able than most to control their passions, they are not passionless. One of the wise man I intend to write about, the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), wrote that “a *wisdom* which does not include passion . . . is not worthy of being called wisdom” and that it “is much less a state than a goal.” Although aware of the tragedy of life and acknowledging “the central fact of death,” Marcel’s wise man was a hopeful seeker and journeyer who saw life as a wonderful mystery.⁸ And Carl Sandburg, the subject of my first sketch along with his wife Paula, thought that “at the root of love—romantic, patriotic, platonic, family love, love for life—was passion.”⁹

Like the wisest modern thinkers, Marcel and Sandburg were both learned people, though both men also recognized a kind of popular or folk wisdom linked with “common sense” that was possible in regard to the everyday problems of life. And Sandburg especially often referred to the wisdom to be found among ordinary people. But the wisest moderns are also knowledgeable about larger global issues, such as the most important socio-economic, political, and environmental problems, and it is hard to think of someone being wise in the broadest sense of the term who is ignorant of history. And time and time again one finds that the wisest people are not only knowledgeable about the humanities, but also appreciate the arts, including music and literature. Marcel, for example, wrote numerous plays and composed some music; and

⁷ Copthorne Macdonald, “Toward Wisdom: Finding Our Way To Inner Peace, Love & Happiness,” 1993, 1996, 2001,

<http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-73462.pdf>, 1-2 (accessed December 23, 2008).

⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond; Including, Conversations Between Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Marcel* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 198, 205, 206.

⁹ Quoted in Penelope Niven, *Carl Sandburg: A Biography* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1991), 697; See also Sandburg's poems "Evening Sunsets Witness and Pass On" and "Fog Numbers" in *Honey And Salt* (New York: Harbrace Paperback, 1963), 23, 34.

Sandburg not only wrote and gave public readings of his poetry, but also gathered folk songs and sang them himself as he accompanied himself on the guitar.

Yet, despite their similarities, wise people have significant differences. They grew up and were influenced by different cultural traditions. Some are men and some are women; some are old and others not so old; some are doers, others are more passive; some are traditional religious believers, others are more free thinkers; some are wise much of their life and others come to wisdom only slowly or after some dramatic turning point or event in their life. And all wise people, like all other humans, have their imperfections and moments when they fail to act as wisely as they might. As Copthorne Macdonald has written: “The world is not divided into wise and unwise people. None of us is perfectly wise or totally unwise,” and each “wise person’s wisdom . . . [has] a distinctive character.”¹⁰ Wisdom seems especially difficult to achieve in the political arena, an area I will examine more closely when I deal with Nelson Mandela, who managed well to accomplish one of the most difficult political tasks—combining a passion for justice with tolerance. By examining the wisdom of his life and others, like those mentioned above, we can hopefully broaden our understanding of wisdom in the modern world and how it operates in various real-life situations.

¹⁰ “Playing the Wisdom Game,” at <http://www.copmacdonald.com/wisdomgame.html> (accessed December 23, 2008).