

# Emergent Wisdom



## Living a Life in Widening Circles

Caroline Bassett

I live my life in widening circles  
That reach out across the world.  
I may not complete this last one  
But I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.

I've been circling for thousands of years  
And I still don't know: am I a falcon,  
A storm, or a great song?

—Rainer Maria Rilke (Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen, from *The Book of Hours* [Rilke 1996])

When I teach classes on wisdom, I tell my students that there are two things for sure I know about it. One is that it does not consist of only one quality. The other is that wise people are not perfect. Although researchers and lay persons alike can come to no commonly accepted definition of wisdom, they all agree that it is a multidimensional construct (Bassett 2005).

If wisdom is not one quality, how many is it? What is it? Further, how do people acquire, achieve, or move towards it? How is it that some people are perceived as wiser than others? Are they dif-

ferent in some specific ways from the rest of us? How can we learn to be wise(r)?

It is these questions that I sought to answer, or at least to probe, when I embarked on a grounded theory research project a few years ago. From this interview study, review of the literature of other research on wisdom, and interdisciplinary reading in such fields as adult learning and development, philosophy, psychology, fiction and poetry, myth, and spirituality, I have developed a model that describes the various components of wisdom, how they interrelate, and how people can learn to become wise(r).

Rilke's poem describes this model in metaphorical language: "I live my life in widening circles." People who are recognized as wise do seem to lead lives that keep expanding in consciousness and awareness. And if you asked them if they are a falcon, a storm, or a great song, they would probably not know because people like this do not tend to think of themselves as a fixed self, but rather one that keeps changing and evolving, and likely, transforming. Hence, they are able to read an environment and create new perspectives with a better fit for changing circumstances or

conditions, rather than rigidly holding on to past patterns or proposing superficial technological fixes. This deeper level of understanding, working, and living in the world presupposes a higher order awareness.

The purpose of this article is to describe the Emergent Wisdom model that I have developed and, because *ReVision* is a journal of consciousness and transformation, to emphasize the transformative aspects of my understanding of wisdom. This article provides an overview to wisdom, a kind of map, of what the whole looks like, at least from my perspective.

### A "map" of wisdom

The grounded theory research for this project consisted of interviews with twenty-four thoughtful, insightful people of public distinction whose names emerged through a modified snowball method. Interviews lasted at least an hour with people from many walks of life, about half male and half female. They included college presidents and professors, business people, clergy, and public servants; they were mostly Caucasian, but also African-American, and one Native American.

The outcome of this project, along a synthesis of the literature from a number of fields, has resulted in a model (or map) that illustrates the complexity of wisdom. Four major components emerged. Each of these major dimensions has attached to it a chief characteristic that describes it, three proficiencies (skilled behaviors), a main manifestation, and several learning prompts or developmental stimuli whose practice can lead to wisdom. At the same time, each of the many elements of this model is related to all (and any) of the others. Unfortunately, a two-dimensional model does not capture this dynamism. It may help to think of this model as a balloon that has been blown up. When uninflated, it is pretty small, and a person cannot see what is written on it. Once it is blown up, the balloon expands, and the letters become legible, but it still all comprises balloonedness. Think of this model or map as wisdom stretched out so that its parts can be bet-

ter perceived, but remember that they are not discrete and separate.

Table 1 shows, in the first column, the major categories that describe wisdom. First, the principal *dimension* is delineated. The *chief characteristic* of each dimension follows, giving a more specific sense of what this quality is about. Then, three *proficiencies* follow for each dimension and chief characteristic. These proficiencies represent skilled and practiced behaviors and attitudes. The *manifestation* tells us how these skills or proficiencies show up in general ways in a person's actions or approaches to life. Finally, the row called *Developmental stimulus/learning prompt* gives us just that—stimuli to promote the development of wisdom. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these learning prompts—all I can suggest is that you use them as a mantra or basso continuo in your life, asking them over and over and not letting yourself kid yourself about what you really

think and believe. After some practice, you will be able to add your own questions.

In the next sections I describe this map of wisdom in some detail.

### Discerning

Within the Discerning dimension of wisdom, which is a cognitive function because the mind is used, we find its chief characteristic, Objectivity. Discernment means the ability to distinguish often quite subtle variations in different qualities and characteristics from each other. Wise people are able to look at the “underlying forces and not be distracted by surface symptoms,” as a business consultant and Episcopal priest put it. Objectivity is necessary in order to be able to step outside of a situation and see it not as you would like it to be, but rather, as it is. Of course, in a postmodern sense, there is no “is,” an absolute reality that we can apprehend as true and real. Instead, we “create”

**TABLE 1. Emergent Wisdom**

WISDOM				
Dimension	Discerning (Cognitive)	Respecting (Affective)	Engaging (Active)	Transforming (Reflective)
Chief characteristic	Objectivity	Openness	Involvement	Self-awareness
Proficiency	Insight Holistic thinking, systemic seeing into complexity Balanced interests	Compassion and caring/ empathy/love Multiple perspective-taking Generosity of spirit/ nonjudgmental	Sound judgment and adept decision making Actions based on determinations of fairness and justice Moral courage	Self-knowledge Self-acceptance Perspective on self as part of systems
Manifestation	Deep understanding of fundamental patterns and relationships	Sense of gratitude/Expanded sphere of consideration	Committed action for the common good	Embracing of paradox and uncertainty/Ability to see beyond the self/ Growing recognition of interdependence
Developmental stimulus/ learning prompt	What's really going on? What's true? What's important? What's right?	Whose point of view am I taking? How does someone else understand reality? How can I relate to them with magnanimity?	What guides my actions? To what ends are my actions directed? What means do I use?	What are my values? How do I live them? Who or what is the “I” that I think I am? What am I part of?

our own perceptions and understandings. Objectivity means seeing a situation with as little projection and distortion as possible. It also refers to ways that we come to understand ourselves in Kegan's (1994) orders of consciousness. This aspect of objectivity will be discussed later.

Three proficiencies are included here. The first, insight, allows us to perceive what others cannot see or see as clearly. Second, with holistic thinking and systemic seeing, we take in the whole of the situation and are able to distinguish what it consists of, what the various parts are, and how they relate to each other. This is how a businessman described it: "Wisdom is the capacity to see the big picture and to know what priority or weight to give things." Finally, with balanced interests I refer to Sternberg's

work (2001) where he indicates that wisdom is a matter of assessing and maintaining some equilibrium over three levels of interests. They include a person's own interests, those of other people (such as family), and those of institutions (for example, organizations, community, nation, or God). To be wise, people cannot think only of themselves, nor can they be totally other-centered to their own detriment and expense. (Buddhists call this idiot compassion.) The needs of the self, of other people, and of the institutions where we associate and meet need to be in some kind of balance.

How do we know if any of these qualities or attributes are in place? We look for their manifestation, and what we will find is a person who demonstrates a deep understanding of fundamental patterns and relationships. The story of Alexander, before he became "the Great," illustrates the dimension of Discerning. In



Phrygia the oracle said that whoever drove his oxcart into the market square would become king. One day a peasant named Gordias came lumbering in. The populace clapped, cheered, and called him king. He was so happy that he tied his cart with a mighty knot to a column of the temple of Zeus. Some years later, the oracle said that whoever undid the knot would rule the world. Of course, many young men came from parts far and near and tried to untie it, to no avail. One day, a fellow arrived, and like the others, he pushed and pulled at the knot. Then, in a flash of insight, he drew his sword and sliced the knot in two, undoing it once and for all. He became king of all of Asia Minor, Alexander the Great, for cutting the Gordian Knot.

#### *Respecting*

But simply being able to see keenly and deeply into what actions mean or

what motivations might reveal does not qualify someone as wise. "You have to care about people," said a state supreme court justice. This dimension, called Respecting, is an affective function. For a long time I struggled with naming it—should it be compassion or empathy or even love?—but none seemed right. Respecting connotes a kind of caring for the other, even another that we might not agree with, feel empathy for, or "love." It is a broader, more inclusive term that requires openness, its chief characteristic. Instead, empathy and compassion seemed more appropriate as a proficiency.

Openness, especially radical openness, requires deliberate effort to escape exclusion, to be able to take the perspective of many different others, particularly the people not at the

table. How is the man across the street thinking about an issue? What is in it for me? For the single mom in the inner city? For the farmers at the other end of the state? Being able to imagine oneself inside the head of another person, a second proficiency of Respecting, represents the development of somewhat sophisticated cognitive processing. Openness also allows for generosity of spirit, that is, a nonjudgmental stance towards other people, an acceptance of them for who they are, faults and all, which is the third proficiency associated with Respecting. As a minister explained, "Wisdom is largeness of spirit that allows people to be [live, work, act] in the world in a positive or healing way."

Respect manifests as both gratitude and an expanded sphere of consideration. As research on aging well demonstrates (see Monika Ardelt's, Dorothy Becvar's, and Connie Goldman's articles in the

next issue of *ReVision*), often the wiser ones express gratitude for even the small things of life. They exude a positive attitude. Also, the number of people and other living creatures that we come to consider expands. In an example from my own life, after visiting my daughter as she worked for the Peace Corps in a poor indigenous village high up at 10,000 feet in Guatemala, I cannot *not* think of Lencha and her husband Santos who gets drunk and beats her, the sisters Len and Wel and Chan and Lux who were barely literate in Spanish and who wanted to learn English from Lucy, and Feliciano and her daughter Nati with a cleft palate that volunteer American doctors have re-paired. These people make up my world now. I am more aware of American foreign policy toward this part of the world, and I have some idea how it may affect these mostly illiterate K'iché-speaking Mayan Indians.

At the same time, respect includes the rest of the biosphere and the other systems that support the biosphere, in other words, the system as a whole. To me, in an obvious example, it seems more respectful of the biosphere to drive a small car than a gas-guzzling Hummer. But expanding our sphere of consideration is usually not simple and straightforward—it can contain contradiction. For example, wetlands need protecting because they support the life of many creatures, but I have some mixed feelings about them because here in Minnesota they produce our state bird—the mosquito—in droves. Also, it is hard to extend my sphere of consideration to some people in the desert parts of our country who wantonly water their lawns and golf courses. When asked

what will happen when the Colorado River and their aquifers run dry, they cavalierly respond, “We’ll pipe it in from the Great Lakes.” Those of us who live in the Great Lakes states respond, however, with a resounding “No way!”

On the other hand, some extraordinary people are able to extend their sphere of consideration even to their enemies. The Dalai Lama prays for the Chinese invaders of Tibet and preaches nonviolence. When Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa after twenty-seven years in prison, he and his government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which investigated atrocities committed during apartheid and granted amnesty to those who confessed their roles in full. These are two examples of greatly expanded spheres of consideration.

### *Engaging*

“I don’t think you will find someone who is wise who leads a passive life. Wisdom comes from going as far as you can and making changes, doing things you are afraid of doing. Wisdom is strength.” These are the words of an activist arrested numerous times for her public political protests. Engaging has to do with action and involvement. However, it does not necessarily mean that everyone has to march publicly holding a sign. Instead, involvement can take place on many levels and in many different ways, such as mentoring others, acting as a role model, writing a letter to the editor, or teaching. The point is that the wisdom gained from discernment and from respect and compassion cannot remain inside the person who sits in her armchair by the fire. It must show itself in the wider world as committed action for the common good, that is, what is

good for many of us, not just for me and the people like me. A college professor stated, “Wisdom is about not always pursuing your own interests (a necessary but not sufficient quality). It also is about being committed to the common good. Wisdom is about action, not just being.”

While all of the proficiencies associated with Engaging manifest as committed action to the common good, they take different forms. One is about decision making. People are often considered wise because of the quality of the decisions that they make and the advice that they give. Think of King Solomon’s celebrated verdict when the two mothers argued over whose child it was. (Actually, this is a good example of how Discerning, Respecting, and Engaging work

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together: King Solomon had insight into how a mother's mind works, he acted with compassion by not choosing one woman over the other, and he made an adept decision. All the parts work together, and it is difficult to separate them out.)

Besides sound judgment and adept decision making, a second proficiency in this area refers to actions based on determinations of fairness and justice. Again, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission represents a remarkable break with past traditions of vengeance and a big step towards doing things on a different basis—with fairness and justice.

The activist quoted above provides a good example of moral courage, the third proficiency. Arrested for the first time in a protest against the Honeywell Corporation (because they made cluster bombs for nuclear warheads) by cops who knew her because they worked with her police officer husband, this frightened woman was driven away in a paddy wagon and fingerprinted. Most of the other people arrested with her pleaded not guilty, but May (a pseudonym) could not in good conscience do this, as she had indeed been trespassing during the protest, and, as a policeman's wife, she felt that she had to set a good example of truth-telling. She was sentenced to

ten days in prison. As there had been threats on her life, she was placed in solitary confinement—this for a woman with claustrophobia so severe that she has to sit on the aisle in a movie theatre. She was allowed one book during this time and chose something by Jane Austen, but May found herself too agitated to read. At the same time, even though her cell was tiny and the window covered, May thought that it would be stupid to disintegrate and decided not to. When the time came for her to be released, many members of the press were present, including national reporters. She remembers thinking that she could have said what every hostage says

upon leaving captivity: "I am so glad to get out and see my family again." But May realized that one does not get a forum like this very often, and even though she was terrified of making speeches, she stated clearly and forcefully the reasons for her protest, making her point in a stronger, more public way. May used her moral courage to maintain her own integrity, keep herself going in the midst of her fear, and bypass clichéd re-entry after release by keeping sight of her mission.

### *Transforming*

This dimension of wisdom, Transforming, is a reflective one. Think of the roots of a tree. Unless they grow widely



and deeply, they cannot sufficiently give stability to the trunk and branches that rise above the soil, nor can they provide sufficient water and nourishment. Like the underground invisible roots of the tree, the proficiencies here are internal ones. The first two are designated as self-knowledge and self-acceptance, which differs from self-knowledge because individuals actually have to acknowledge and at least tolerate the more negative parts of themselves. Self-awareness is the chief characteristic of this dimension—the whole that holds it together.

The final proficiency represents one of the most important in this whole map. It is the fulcrum or hinge that

allows the whole process of becoming wiser to cycle again, but on a deeper level—a transformation. This map of wisdom is thus really a spiral, circling ever wider and deeper into greater understanding of fundamental patterns and relationships, expanded spheres of consideration, and actions that are committed to the common good.

For this transformation to take place, a higher order consciousness needs to develop. This part of the discussion will utilize Kegan's (1994) theory of orders of consciousness; exploration of transpersonal realms (cf. Ken Wilber, for example, [2000]) or connections to spirituality (cf. Ferrer [2002]) will not take place here. First, in Kegan's system, a person will realize how

unconsciously socialized he or she is by the framework of beliefs surrounding him or her and, with awareness, can learn to take control of them by taking perspective on them. This is Kegan's fourth order consciousness. Here, the self, the interior of a person, owns itself, instead of having the parts of that self governed by the unconscious beliefs of the psychological surround. This means that we move out of an orientation of being shaped by the expectations around us and instead become what Kegan calls *self-authoring*. (Note: see Jim Hammerman's and Jennifer Berger's articles in this issue for more on Kegan's

work. The very title of Monika Ardel's article in the Summer issue reveals a fourth order awareness: "'I've never allowed any outside force to take possession of my being'—How wise people cope with crises and obstacles in life.") Like several Catholic friends of mine, *you* decide whether to practice birth control or not, despite having been brought up in devout households that practiced traditional Catholicism. You decide to vote Democratic even though your family and your hometown have always preferred the Republican ticket.

Second and more important for our discussion here on trans-*form*-ation, which means changing the very form of something, comes another step, where a

person moves towards or into Kegan's fifth order of consciousness. A major shift in awareness takes place here. Ironically, as individuals increasingly author their own lives and choices, at some point some people find themselves arriving at the limits of this process, where a subjective self no longer seems relevant or even possible. That is, they begin to comprehend that what they are is not a single internal system but rather a composite of parts within and of a greater whole, a larger perspective that includes the self but is not the self. In other words, a person *has* a self but *is not* the self. Unlike the fourth order with a single self that is identified with and that manages the desires and conflicts of its various sub-systems, now we have an ever-changing polytheistic internal universe. Or, as Ray Becvar describes it in this issue, we confront an internal multiverse with many possible, plausible, and competing worldviews and epistemologies.

How can a person not go crazy? What holds it all together? The self becomes understood not as a *unit* seeking stability, but rather as a *process* where the sub-parts constantly shift, adjust, and change. This is the *self-transforming self*. From this vantage point, a person is able more and more to "empty the subjective side and take the world's perspective on things" (R. Kegan, pers. com., October 24, 2003).

Here is an example of taking the world's perspective. At a recent conference Maxine Greene, a retired professor of philosophy and education at Columbia University and patron of the arts in New York City, told in her speech about the death the previous year of her grown daughter after a brief illness. On the anniversary of this death, Maxine did not know what to do that day. She decided to see the movie *The Official Story* about the disappeared in Argentina. In the film a woman adopts a girl

and loves her very much, but when she realizes that her husband is one of the generals in charge of making people disappear, the woman searches for and finds the real mother of the child. With unbelievable pain, she returns the girl to her own mother. This experience led Maxine Greene to understand that she is a part of the human drama. She is part of the much larger story of all people who have lost their children.

What does the development of a self-transforming self that can take the world's perspective, which is a rare quality and hard to describe, have to do with wisdom? People with this quality tend to be open and curious because they are not defending the existence of a single internal system or set of beliefs. And because of this, they can often think beyond the standard established ways of doing things, and create, for example, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or as May did, speak out about her political truth rather than expressing her need to be with her family. They can break set, as the saying goes. With their well-developed integrity, they find it next to impossible to just go along with things because that is the way it has always been done. They adapt; they change; they make new things emerge. By taking the world's perspective, they can accept the existence of paradox and uncertainty as part of the way the world works. Further, a growing recognition of interdependence ensues because of the transformative shift to realizing that the self is, after all, just a part of a much larger whole. As one woman who heads a cultural center in the inner city told me, "I don't think of myself as an individual. I learn about my Africanness through what I see in the community, and I know I am where I am now because I ride on the backs of many, many others." She indeed realizes that she is a part of a larger whole.

Or, as a local legislator put it, "You

can't be wise unless you can get outside of yourself." This realization of being able to get outside of yourself allows a person to go through the whole cycle of wisdom over and over, with more discernment and objectivity because of seeing the world with fewer distortions and projections, with more respect and openness because the sense of self has enlarged and the sphere of consideration has expanded, and with more engagement and involvement because good judgment (at least to some extent) naturally ensues from a clearer apprehension of reality. Finally, transformation and integrity allow for a deeper acceptance of paradox and recognition of interdependence—in short, the whole mystery of the world and of wisdom.

Then, we do indeed lead our lives in widening circles that spread out across the world, and we won't know if we are falcons, storms, or great songs. It doesn't matter, however, because we know we won't complete the cycle of becoming totally wise, but we give ourselves to it. We give ourselves to the process of wisdom.

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