

# Words from the Wise: Exploring the Lives, Qualities, and Opinions of Wisdom Exemplars

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research was to study exemplars of wisdom through a structured, theoretically grounded peer-nomination process. Twenty exemplars were given a variety of quantitative measures that included the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS), State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), Spiritual Perspective Scale (SPS), Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS), Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16), Humility Inventory (HI), Big Five Inventory (BFI), and the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT). Exemplars also underwent lengthy semi-structured interviews to assess their lives, qualities, and understanding of wisdom. Interviews were analyzed for their significant themes. Results of this study suggest that exemplars of wisdom are humble, spiritual, mindful, insightful, tell the truth, and are open to experiences. They have meaningful, long-term relationships with mentors and loved ones. Exemplars are deeply influential in the lives of others and have very high life satisfaction. The 2 predominant definitions of wisdom given by exemplars were that wisdom is practical and comes from the unknown. Exemplars offered multiple strategies for the cultivation of wisdom-related processes, primarily the relationship with a mentor. Future research may clarify an emerging relationship between transcendent and practical wisdom.

**Keywords:** Exemplars, qualitative, quantitative, spirituality, wisdom.

## Introduction

Would investigating people who are actually considered wise be helpful for the human enterprise? Might they offer reflections about life meaning and satisfaction that elude the rest of us? Could they provide both practical and theoretical insights into wisdom's conception, cultivation, and potential to be learned and taught? What are their spiritual perspectives, generative offerings, and experiences of anxiety and stress? With few exceptions, the psychological investigation of wisdom has primarily focused on randomly selected people and their ideas on wisdom (Trowbridge, 2005, 2008).

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Echoing the sentiments of Aristotle (Robinson, 1990) and Abraham Maslow (1971), lifespan experts Lucinda Orwoll and Marion Perlmutter (1990) wrote, “To really know what wise people are like, you have to study them” (p. 174). Advancing this notion, the present research descriptively and empirically explored the lives, opinions, and wisdom-related characteristics of those who have purportedly excelled in its understanding.

## **Brief Context and Relevance**

The modern empirical and theoretical study of wisdom is relatively young, as wisdom’s association with philosophy and the advent of behaviorism kept it from the realm of psychological inquiry until roughly 35 years ago. Researchers like Ardelt (1997), Baltes (1990), Clayton and Birren (1980), and Sternberg (1986) ushered in the modern era, introducing wisdom to the realm of psychological discourse. Since 1980, over 100 empirical studies have been undertaken, none of which have included exemplars, with the qualitative exception of Ahmadi (1998, 2000) and Thomas (1991).

More recently, philosophers and psychologists have spent decades trying to define the essence of wisdom, with the Arête Initiative at the University of Chicago (2008) providing a contemporary backdrop for this inquiry. Agreement seems to converge around wisdom being characterized as elusive, multidimensional, integrative, and oriented toward what is good, both individually and collectively. Prevailing psychological and theoretical models have enhanced wisdom conceptions through empirical measurement, the solicitation of implicit opinions, cross-cultural aggregations, developmental paradigms, and personality correlates. Personal components such as openness, insight, generativity, and spirituality have been related to wisdom, and exemplars offer the opportunity to explore and compare these associations. Mindfulness, spirituality, and humility offer particularly new investigations into the psychological study of wisdom, while anxiety, stress, and narcissism would seem to relate inversely.

Modern empirical research most relevant to exemplars demonstrates rudimentary efforts to seek out the wise through a variety of methodologies and inquiries. On the whole, a large proportion of empirical studies have focused on randomly chosen people’s conceptions, and no studies carried out thus far have included exemplars. Paraphrasing Orwoll and Perlmutter (1990), learning from wise people necessitates that we actually converse with them. Furthermore, studying and conversing with those who are purportedly wise is thought to contribute an increasingly material wisdom perspective to a theoretically based discipline.

More broadly, researchers (e.g., Sternberg, 2004) contend that the word wisdom “exists as an eternal witness of the hope that humans can make thoughtful, caring, and intelligent choices for the well-being of all whom they affect” (Trowbridge, 2005, p. 50). As some (Ardelt, 2000a; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990) claim that exemplars embody wisdom itself, it seems relevant to learn about their lives, garner their perspectives and reflections, and assess their characteristics.

Scholarly research into wisdom has yet to explore and assess exemplars, and they, and their perspectives, remain urgently needed. Trowbridge (2005) reflects, “The particular value of studying exemplars carefully is that they can show us the way to wisdom” (p. 248). While it

seems more likely that multiple pathways exist toward wisdom's realization, the lives and opinions of exemplars are promising for the future of this inquiry.

## **Methodology: Approach, Rationale, and Assessment**

Inspired by the suggestions of wisdom's psychological and empirical predecessors, contemporary scholars have given some guidance for carrying out a study of this type, calling it the exemplar and personological approach (Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990; Trowbridge, 2005). The exemplar approach makes use of qualified nominators to identify persons who exemplify wisdom, and once selected, the personological approach recommends a collection of integrative data, including interviews, assessments, and surveys. While "validation support for peer nominations is still sparse in the study of wisdom" (Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990, p. 167), precedence for this research strategy can be found in studies of persons with exceptional adjustment, ego development, and intelligence.

This combined methodology is particularly well suited for the current research when viewed from both theoretical and practical perspectives. First, this protocol provides a means of focusing explicit attention on people who are clustered at the upper end of the proposed wisdom continuum (Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990). Second, it is based on the premise that wisdom can be better understood by the intensive study of those considered to be wise (Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990). Finally, it contends that exceptionally wise people should provide insight into wisdom's nature, including the potential interrelationships among various correlates of wisdom; development, including events and life course processes contributing to wisdom; and consequences, including what it means to live a wise and meaningful life.

## **Employing Mixed Methods**

Fittingly, to best fulfill the primary areas of investigation and actualize the methodologies set forth, I have instituted an integrative research design using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Such interplay between qualitative and quantitative approaches was intended to expand documentation of the "elusive and subjective nature of the construct of wisdom and relate them to objectively assessed dimensions of wise people" (Lyster, 1996, p. 26).

### **Qualitative**

The qualitative methods of in-depth semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis provided explorations into co-participants' lives, opinions, and wisdom-related qualities and characteristics. This course of investigation permitted me to potentially uncover otherwise inaccessible information by following up with emerging areas of interest with the interviewee (Braud & Anderson, 1998). Content analysis also allowed for the discovery of various layers of meaning through systematic identification (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 278) of both predetermined content areas and emergent themes.

## Quantitative

Quantitative measures and questionnaires, including the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Spiritual Perspective Scale (SPS), Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS), Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16), Foundational Value Scale (FVS), Big Five Inventory (BFI), Humility Inventory (HI), and Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT) provided performance-based and empirical data about dimensions of wise persons. Converging information was then drawn on to assess the nomination validity of co-participants considered exemplars of wisdom, elucidate the nature of their wisdom, provide an empirical means to compare exemplars to the norm, and provide for an assessment of specific inter-correlations. As a side note, I considered the WUSCT a quantitative measure for this study because I was hypothesizing about the overall WUSCT average score, not utilizing the content of the open ended responses directly as data.

## Exemplar Nominators

This research design utilized two groups of co-participants most suited for its purposes: exemplar nominators and exemplars of wisdom.

To address validity in the selection of exemplars, Orwoll and Perlmutter (1990) wrote, “Confidence in the nomination procedure can be enhanced with multiple nominators and particularly qualified nominators” (p. 167). While they provide no specific parameters regarding a nominator sample size, 15 were utilized within the current study. Moreover, these nominators fulfilled the particularly qualified exemplar proviso by being prescreened for the wisdom-facilitative criteria of the world’s leading empirical researchers of wisdom, the Max Planck Institute (Ardelt, 2004a; Sternberg, 1998).

The wisdom-facilitative criterion emerged from Baltes and Staudinger’s 1993 study and consists of a “background of and/or professional activity in areas we consider facilitative of the accumulation of wisdom-related knowledge” (p. 77). These areas include teaching, pastoral/ministerial counseling, and clinical psychology/counseling. Modern empirical research adds credence to both these findings and the current design rationale, as Staudinger et al. (1998) found that the greatest predictive factor for wisdom is profession, particularly within fields oriented toward the human condition. Additionally, in the Lyster (1996) study, wise nominees were disproportionately represented in human-service professions, particularly the advising professions of ministry, mental health, and education. Helson and Srivastava (2002) also found that a career in spiritual activity “added significantly to the prediction of wisdom” (p. 39).

Moreover, exemplar nominators were sought that have not just one but a convergence of these *wisdom-facilitative* experiences over the longest period of time (Montgomery et al., 2002). Baltes and Staudinger (1993) call this approach “age by experience” (p. 77), and theoretically, the current nominators, having had greater exposure to *wisdom-facilitative* experiences over time than the average person, were predicted to be more capable of articulating the nature of their wisdom and identifying it in others (Trowbridge, 2005).

Once selected, nominators were asked to identify between two and five exemplars of wisdom that they knew personally, identify the two wisest exemplars, and communicate their selections to me. If nominators believed themselves to be one of the two wisest exemplars, they were asked to include themselves. Nominators were invited to a) fill out a demographic questionnaire, b) complete a measure of wisdom characteristics (FVS) that seems to reflect the exemplars qualities, c) write a one-page description of why he or she is an exemplar of wisdom, and d) provide the context and length of time in relationship with the exemplar.

## **Exemplars of Wisdom**

Wisdom exemplars consisted of 20 co-participants identified by the nominators and willing to take part in the study. I preferred no parameters for age, education level, gender, sex, religious orientation, marital/domestic partner status, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity. However, it was my inclination to conduct as many interviews as possible in person. Therefore, many participants resided in the San Francisco Bay Area and I traveled when necessary and possible.

## **Qualitative Assessment**

The qualitative method employed was the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with the exemplar group. Questions were chosen that explored the lives, opinions of wisdom, and wisdom-related characteristics of co-participants. Questions were generally intended to be open-ended, allowing the co-participants to respond widely. The interview structure provided for the researcher to first, inquire first about co-participant lives; second, explore their wisdom-related characteristics, and finally, elicit their opinions of wisdom. The rationale for interviewing in this order was to avoid biasing co-participants by leading with explicit references to wisdom.

Sample interview questions included: What is your life like? How did you come to be the way you are? What are you doing for the common good? What are your values? What are your decision-making strategies? What are your spiritual perspectives? What concerns do you have, if any? How do you define wisdom? Can wisdom be learned? What personal and general components or conditions might facilitate its emergence and make it more accessible? Who do you consider to be wise?

Qualitative data from the current study was examined by performing a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each transcript was read at least three times upon its reception, and computer-assisted text analysis using MAXQDA (Verbi Software, 2007) was employed for coding and organizing the interviews. MAXQDA is used in a wide range of academic and non-academic disciplines, including sociology, political science, psychology, public health, anthropology, education, marketing, economics and urban planning (Hawes, 2006). Advantages include its flexibility, user friendliness, and highly advanced visualization for the processes of coding, memo writing, and browsing. An essentialist or realist approach was then taken which “reports experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Theoretical, or pre-established areas of interest, and inductive methods or data driven themes were assessed.

In service of illuminating the lives and opinions of exemplars, I explored pre-established categories consistent with the interview questions/research areas as well as additional emergent themes. Emergent themes are defined as common patterns that were observed in the final analysis, but not derived from previous notions. In sum, the goal of the qualitative methodology was the emergence of a larger, more in-depth picture through a detailed description of categories, patterns, and themes for all co-participants included (Gross, 1995).

In order to operationalize this approach, the six-phase process of Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed. First, I became familiar with the data, including having the interviews transcribed, reading and re-reading the data, and noting initial ideas. Second, initial codes were generated across the entire data set based on intensity, density, and frequency. Third, codes were collated into themes, and themes were searched for and data relevant to each theme was gathered. Fourth, themes were reviewed and checked. Fifth, themes were named and defined, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Finally, the report was produced with extract examples.

Advantages of the TA include its flexibility, accessibility to researchers with little or no experience of qualitative research, ability to highlight similarities and differences across the data set, capacity to generate unanticipated insights, and accessible results for the educated general public. Disadvantages included the difficulty of retaining a sense of continuity and contradiction through any one individual account.

### **Quantitative Assessment**

The quantitative assessments are confirmatory and address multiple hypotheses related to assessing exemplar's wisdom-related qualities and characteristics:

It was hypothesized that Exemplars' average score on the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale would exceed the cutoff score considered to be wise, 201.6.

Second, it was hypothesized that exemplars' average scores on the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS), Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Big Five Inventory (BFI) Openness to Experience, and Spiritual Perspective Scale (SPS) would exceed the normative mean scores for each measure by at least 10%.

Third, it was hypothesized that exemplars' average scores on the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), and Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16) would fall below the mean normative scores of each measure by at least 10%.

Fourth, it was hypothesized that exemplars' average score on the WUSCT would exceed the highest conventional stage of adult development, the Achiever, 4.0.

Fifth, it was hypothesized that there would be statistically significant ( $p = .05$ ) positive correlations between the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS) and: BFI Openness to Experience, Spiritual Perspective Scale (SPS), Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), and Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS).

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## Key Summary of Findings

### Demographics

The study was comprised of two samples, the exemplar group ( $n = 20$ ) and nominator group ( $n = 15$ ) group. Exemplars' average age was 69.5 years, approximately 10 years greater than the average nominator age. Nominators knew exemplars on average 25 years in multiple contexts, most often having exemplars as their colleagues and teachers. Exemplars were predominantly Caucasian, very well educated, and most were married or had a significant other. Nearly all reported having a current religious or spiritual tradition and practice.

### Exemplars' Wisdom-Related Qualities and Characteristics

#### Self-Report Measures

The average exemplar score on the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale exceeded the cutoff considered to be wise, consistent with the prediction. Exemplars' average scores on the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS), Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Big Five Inventory (BFI) Openness to Experience, and Spiritual Perspective Scale (SPS) exceeded the normative mean scores for each measure by at least 10%, consistent with the prediction.

Exemplars' average scores on the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) fell below the mean normative scores of each measure by at least 10%, consistent with the prediction. Exemplars' average scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16) and STAI Trait-Anxiety did not fall below the mean normative scores of each measure by at least 10%, inconsistent with the prediction. Exemplars' average score on the WUSCT exceeded the highest conventional stage of adult development, the Achiever, 4.0, consistent with the prediction, although much more will be said about ego development and wisdom later in this paper.

#### *Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient*

There were found to be statistically significant positive correlations between the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS) and: BFI Openness to Experience, Spiritual Perspective Scale (SPS), and Humility Inventory (HI), consistent with the prediction. There were found to be positive, but not significant correlations between the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS) and: Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) and Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS), inconsistent with the prediction. These results suggest that higher levels of wisdom were correlated with increases in openness, humility, and the importance of spirituality.

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## **Qualitative Exemplar Wisdom-Related Qualities and Characteristics**

### **Nominator Narratives and Exemplar Interviews**

Six significant personal qualities were found in the nominator narratives about exemplars: honesty, compassion, spirituality, integration, understanding, and openness. Four core personal qualities were found in the semi-structured exemplar interviews: they tell the truth, are able to tolerate uncertainty, are grateful and appreciative, and are funny and lighthearted.

#### *Foundational Value Scale*

Exemplar qualities rated most highly by nominators on the Foundational Value Scale (FVS) were intelligence, having a sense of meaning and purpose, harmoniousness, and spirituality. The lowest scoring qualities were genius and being animated.

### **Exemplars' Lives**

#### *Nominator Narratives*

Overall, nominators described exemplars as deeply engaged in life and meaningful relationships. This finding was evidenced by exemplars' personal impact on the nominators, painful life experiences, valuing helping others, being sought out for counsel, the validation of peers, and remaining in contact with their own experience.

#### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Three core themes were uncovered through analysis in the semi-structured interviews about exemplars lives. First, exemplars reported deeply meaningful encounters and intimate connections with mentors and loved ones. Second, spirituality is important, as reflected in exemplars' beliefs and practices, including the unity of spirituality and life, practicing meditation, attending retreats, and having access to a reflective articulation process. Finally, exemplars are guides for others and have an impactful presence as luminaries, transformational catalysts, and teachers with specific means of sharing with others.

### **Exemplars' Opinions of Wisdom**

Exemplars primarily defined wisdom as arising from the unknown and as practical. Some examples of wise behavior included connecting with another human being, restraining action, and making an important life decision without knowing why. Exemplars thought that people are wise about different things and nominated predominantly spiritual and religious figures as wise.

### **Exemplars' Ideas about How to Cultivate Wisdom**

Exemplars offered multiple (technologies) strategies for the cultivation of wisdom-related processes, although there was disagreement about whether wisdom itself was teachable.



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*Mentors and Teachers*

Ten of 20 (50%) exemplars spoke about (acquiring wisdom) wisdom-related acquisitions through mentors and teachers. Exemplars identified as important: role modeling and watching how mentors and teachers live, practicing what they are practicing, the consistency of relating, being helped to find your own way within, and cultivating deeper accessibility. Below are three examples:

The best way to learn it is to hang out with wise people . . . You become wise when you spend time with somebody who has some wisdom. And just that consistency of relating for a period of time, you get to know how people think and how they respond and so forth. So that I think that it's a matter of finding the people that you admire and that you want to hang out with or work with. So that's how you pick it up. (EX 10)

For me with my teachers, I would say it was a twofold process. One was kind of, in practicing what they were teaching, I began to see what they saw. And so I could appreciate the wisdom in them from the wisdom that was growing in me because they showed me how to see in a certain way. And then I realized, oh, that's how they're seeing. So that was, I think, one powerful appreciation of their wisdom. And the other was just in watching how they lived. You know, and it's not to say, I mean, in many of my teachers it's not that I didn't see at certain times, you know, certain faults of things that I thought were not that skillful, but overall, I could really appreciate the wisdom of how they lived just in basically leading good lives, basically wise and compassionate lives. (EX 15)

I think that a way wisdom is passed on is people find their path, or somehow discover their path, and there's someone ahead of them that can see them on the path. And they say, "No, no, no, no. You're getting a little too far to the right. No, no, no, no. You're going too—a little too far to the left." And that appears to be helpful . . . Then they're doing whatever they're doing . . . with – in their life with all the exigencies and suffering that they face. And through that combination wisdom can result. Not necessarily will, but can. (EX 20)

*Let Wisdom Arise From a Larger Source*

Eight of 20 (40%) exemplars talked about learning wisdom as a letting go, surrendering, and experiencing an incarnation from something larger than the individual. Examples that illustrate the theme are offered below:

And that—and I guess that's another argument for saying that wisdom is very much something that happens through you because so is love. It's like when you can let yourself be completely open and let go of your own biases and your own conditioning and your own need to hold yourself together, then both of those qualities can spontaneously emerge. And I think the true gift of spiritual awakening is the emergence of both of those qualities, when they're needed, or when there's, you know, it's not like you go around all the time feeling wise and loving. It's just that life responds to as needed with those qualities spontaneously . . . Then beginning to trust what arises spontaneously. (EX 9)

No, I don't think so. I think that simply the heart or spirit, if you want to use the Jungian term, the self in the larger "S." has a wisdom. It's amazing to me when I give up and let go what information comes to me; what direction I find to go. Say, a wise heart or movement inside of me that I have to constantly return to who, that gives me that. I don't think you can teach it; it comes out of the, it comes out of the experience of surrender. But that's a lifetime. (EX 17)

Being able to surrender is the number one attribute. Can you let go and get out of the way and surrender to something that's bigger than you? (EX 8)

And, in fact, the study we did was, in a way, teaching people to access wisdom, showing them a way that their consciousness could come up with an answer. (EX 14)

The disciplines of how one responds to and takes in, you know, the phenomenon of wisdom can be pointed to and taught and so forth. But it's like can you really teach people to be wise? Can you really teach people to have a deeper inner sense of themselves? Can you really teach them that? And I don't think you can. I think it's a matter of learning how to open one's self up to that. But you can teach the way to be aware and absorb, you know, the honoring of life and its wisdom. But it's not a commodity. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. It's not a commodity you can teach. It's something by the grace of life itself that can be incorporated but it's not an achievement . . . It's an incarnation. Not dissimilar from the Christian sense of incarnation of God and Jesus. So I really think it has a much broader metaphysical quality to it other than just the human accomplishment. And teach, I think, how one can receive it, but you can't teach wisdom. Nobody ever truly has fully incorporated wisdom. It's much bigger than the individual. (EX 11)

Could being wise be taught? Or having this experience of wisdom – I guess what would be more true for me would be the process, the cognitive and non-cognitive. So all the other ones, somatic and intuitive and, you know, getting information from other sources: emotional, body, psychic. The processes that would lead to that experience, the experience of wisdom, and then the subsequent urge to share. I think those can be cultivated, definitely. (EX 4)

Sometimes it is wise to trust how life is unfolding even when we do not a clue about what to do, or why we responded the way we did. Some movement wiser than us may be in charge. (EX 17)

This may go back to one of the things that I really trust and believe – that there is an unfolding wisdom that enfolds us beyond what we can create for ourselves. That life is beneficial to us in spite of all the anxieties and difficulties and frustrations and deprivations and all that stuff. And honoring both the consolations and the desolations, because they're both meaningful. They both have their own way of evolving your life. (EX 11)

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*Getting Mind Out of the Way, Decentering From Primary Identity as Thinking*

Six of 20 exemplars (30%) spoke about learning wisdom-related processes as facilitated by decentering from a primary self-identification with the thinking mind and cognitive processes. All six examples are provided below:

A reduction in cognitive processes, so that you're not totally in your head, and more access to feelings and education of feelings. (EX 8)

Another aspect is facilitating empathy and getting the conscious mind, not just thinking, not just sensate – getting the conscious mind out of the way and providing quiet time. It's the same sorts of things that you would think of in some kind of meditation or spiritual practice where you are getting the conditioned automatic reactions out of the way, out of the dominant way, so that any of those that are appropriate may be used, rather than ones that are overly conditioned. (EX 14)

You can only point. You can only point to a way of holding something that's bigger than the mind. When you stop paying attention to your mind it stops being such a bother. When you stop taking it so seriously. When a thought comes through and you just look at it and say, whoa, that's interesting. Wonder where that one came from. But you don't buy into it and create a big story around it. Pretty soon that function stops functioning in the way it does when you really believe you are your thoughts. I think that most of the time we humans think we are our thoughts. (EX 9)

Certainly, not conceptually. (EX 20)

Also there are a myriad number of specific techniques and strategies from gently helping people recognize presuppositions; and then recognize them as presuppositions rather than as facts . . . then encouraging people to test those presuppositions. (EX 16)

Let go. Get out of your head. Being in the head is a total detriment, a total detriment. Remember the mind is always looking for answers the soul already knows. (EX 8)

*Motivation/Commitment/Investment and Doing the Work Ourselves*

Five of 20 (25%) exemplars spoke about the relationship between motivation, commitment, and doing the work oneself as integral to the potential to learn wisdom-related processes. Five exemplars spoke about it this way:

One of the most important things of all for learning wisdom is a commitment to doing so, the commitment to learning and understanding. (EX 16)

A strong motivation. You can sit quietly for an hour and nothing happens, but if you go in with a motivation to say, "I want an answer to this. I want to know what's right for me," if you set an intention—and that's the word that we're using now – set an intention, then wisdom tends to be pulled into that magnetic direction. (EX 14)

I think there are a few things. One of the things that has been my prime motivator over all these years is the quality of interest, just being interested in the mind, in suffering, in what causes it. And so in some ways, the truest meaning of the word philosophy, you know, kind of lover of wisdom, it's just that real interest in understanding I think is a very powerful force. What can motivate that interest can be different things. (EX 15)

In order to make it a real living wisdom, then it has to be a methodology of training attention so that we can see things clearly for ourselves. And that is the whole methodology of the path. So it can be taught, but people need to do the work themselves. It can't be given. There's a famous line in the text about how the Buddhas only point the way, and everybody needs to walk the path for themselves. So the way can be pointed out, and the path of practice can be pointed out, but real wisdom develops only when we actually do the work. And it's the work of paying attention. (EX 15)

And the thing that worried me the most about that is if somebody else knows and somebody else tells you, then you're always a receiver and you're never an actor. We really only learn through the things we do. (EX 13)

### *Learn From Experience/Reflection*

Four of 20 exemplars (20%) spoke about acquiring wisdom as learning from experience and reflection, a kind of iteration process. Below are four illustrations:

One acquires wisdom, in large part, by reflecting on experience. And so to teach wisdom involves helping people reflect on their experience. For many people, that means helping get in touch with their experience in the first place. Also there are a myriad number of specific techniques and strategies from gently helping people recognize presuppositions; and then recognize them as presuppositions rather than as facts . . . then encouraging people to test those presuppositions. (EX 16)

There's a reflection component, there is an iteration of looking at something. Whether it's practical or spiritual within the self or outside the self, there is a reflection and an action and a refinement and a reflection and an action and, from what I know, it's called, you know, double-loop, triple-loop learning when you're going over and over. And then finally comes out something that is helping you overcome an obstacle, reach more joy in your life, solve a problem, practically create something that's going to help your entire tribe survive. That level of internal processing has to be in place. (EX 4)

When I think about the people I've known through my life who are wise, I think I would conclude that they had a lot of life experience. It just didn't arrive with them in their genes. (EX 19)

I think a person's ability to learn from experience. (EX 5)

## Discussion: State and Stage Development and Transcendent and Practical Wisdom

The study prediction was that Exemplars' average score on the WUSCT would exceed the highest conventional stage of adult development, the Achiever, 4.0. Implicit in this prediction was the idea that wisdom and ego development were likely related and potentially positively correlated. Exemplars average score on the WUSCT was just above 4.0. This finding means that exemplars average score *technically* exceeded the Achiever stage of adult development, consistent with the prediction. Sixty percent of exemplars, however, scored in the conventional stages.

The professional WUSCT scorer, Terri O' Fallon, was uniquely qualified for this study because of her personal interest and ongoing research in late stage development, specifically the late-fifth person perspective (5/6) and the late-sixth person perspective (6+). When I mentioned surprise at exemplars' predominantly conventional scores, she replied:

At first when I was doing the scoring, I was also so struck by this and didn't want to believe the scores I was getting. I did inter-rater reliability scoring with other people and they just didn't turn out very late for any of us. (T. O' Fallon, personal communication, December 4, 2009)

On the one hand, Cook-Greuter (1985) points out that highly developed individuals may score lower than their level of development. This problem stems from the fact that what Cook-Greuter calls the post conventional stages, 5-6, are post linguistic, while the WUSCT is based on language. This means that the WUSCT, effectively, is trying to evaluate the presence of higher-developmental stages with methods—those being language and writing—that are more commonly associated with lower-level developmental stages. To this point, O' Fallon writes "People at these later two levels not only need an abundance of responses, but they also need to have a variety of responses to different categories. It is very complex" (personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Reviewing exemplar scores on the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), which preceded the WUSCT, exemplars were already "feeling strained," their highest State-Anxiety score, and "unrested," their highest Trait-Anxiety score. It is possible, therefore, that they did not say enough to score higher on the WUSCT due to feeling strained and tired, or tended to conceal their levels of development by giving short, simple answers to save time and energy. Comments from several exemplars at the end of the survey offered support to these perspectives. However, O' Fallon reflects, "We cannot guess what people mean . . . they have to delineate what they mean" (personal communication, December 4, 2009).

On the other hand, the above explanations for lower than expected WUSCT scores, while plausible, might also be relatively weak. If these scores are accurate, however, and wisdom exemplars are primarily situated at a conventional level of development, what meaning can be made of this? What do these development scores mean in relationship to wisdom – perhaps that later stage ego development is not necessarily correlated with wisdom and being/becoming wise?

Interestingly, the WUSCT correlations with the Self Assessed Wisdom Scale (SAWS) composite and all SAWS subscales were *not* significant. The WUSCT was only correlated significantly with one measure in the entire exemplar battery of tests, including all measure subscales. The positive and significant correlation of the WUSCT was with the Spiritual Perspective Scale (SPS). It is my opinion that reflecting on later *state stage* exemplar spiritual experiences could shed some light on the generally conventional ego development scores in relationship to wisdom.

## **Exemplar Spiritual States, Experiences, and Perspectives**

One of the most compelling spiritual perspectives found to be important in the lives of nearly two thirds of exemplars, was an insight into, or an abiding recognition of, being a part of the whole of life, being a part of larger creation, or both:

I just went into another whole level of recognition of my true nature I guess you would say. And it was like consciousness simply letting go of everything I am. And merging with everything that is. And I don't know. It was like a recognition of truth that I couldn't possibly ever deny again. (EX 9)

What was striking about it was the understanding of the selfless nature of everything. The limitation of how we usually think of a sense of self as being the particular body we inhabit, you know, and being limited to that frame. That boundary fell away just afterwards. And it was just, there was more a, just a totality of experience rather than any one part of it being me. (EX 15)

And finally it snapped you know . . . there isn't a spiritual and something else . . . It's the all of everything, nothing is left out. (EX 6)

Interestingly, the recognition of being part of larger creation was not just reflective of a small contingent of exemplars with Eastern religious and spiritual pedigree. Exemplars with Christian traditions and practices spoke similarly:

If I have to articulate an image of God these days it's simply life. Yeah, simply life. And that life itself has its own way of being. And it is that way of being of our life that is the sacred ground. And we don't have to symbolize or image it in any other way to define it. (EX 11)

The idea is that we really are part of this universe . . . And so you come to understand that our connectedness, that we are all, and all we are . . . is energy. I mean, that's enough, but that's what we are. (EX 5)

Critically, each of the above exemplars is an ordained spiritual teacher, so they could just be expressing beliefs or ideas associated with their traditions. An argument could also be made that exemplars' spiritual appointments add credence to their words. Levitt (1999) found consistently religious perspectives in her study of Buddhist monks, as did Ahmadi (1998, 2000) in her study of Sufis, which makes sense. Certainly, spiritual and religious perspectives are useful but they

could be garnered from many sources, including sacred texts. Of more relevance is, are exemplars' words reflective of their lived reality, if only for a moment?

An honest assessment of exemplars' experiences of unity would likely require one's own capacity to see what is seen by exemplars. While I make no claims to a shared worldview, sitting and listening to exemplars offer their spiritual views felt like not just words and concepts but their own inner experiences. And being in their presence, for the most part, was opening in ways that were inspiring, motivating, and emotionally moving.

Obviously, my self-report does not validate exemplars' inner subjective life, nor do any of the measures in the study explicitly reflect it. Exemplars did score highly on humility and value truth telling; however. Le (2008a) also found that transcendent wisdom develops later in life than practical wisdom – and – developing transcendent wisdom later in life overlaps with exemplars average age, nearly 70. The significance of exemplars' spiritual insight warranted considering validity, because, if true, exemplars' recognition of being a part of the whole of life expands their identity beyond just humanness to “life, selflessness, energy, true nature, and the all of everything,” to quote their words.

A second finding supportive of the recognition of being a part of all creation is found in exemplars' attendance of retreats. Exemplars' retreat experiences were often imbued with profound insights into a greater connection with life:

That big shift, that transformative shift really happened when I did the 30-Day Ignatian Retreat, which was 11 years ago, but it's still as fresh as can be. I really move back into those states, although I've moved way beyond who I was at that point. But It really had to do with that awareness that came to me during that retreat; that all this “driven-ness” to make my life meaningful kind of got spoken to by an inner voice that emerged of saying, “Remember, J, that I gave you your meaning at your birth.” And that awareness was so transformative that it just lifted that anxiety burden of driving myself to make myself meaningful to either myself or the people around me. And allowed me to relax a bit. And it re-contextualized my life in terms of the “driven-ness” to be somebody, rather than simply internally affirm the being that I am. And I think that transition not only brought a lot of relief but, you know, reframed a sense of myself, but then also began to reframe how I experience things in the world, how I experienced other people. You know, so much of my work now is encouraging people simply to be who they are rather than striving so hard to be somebody else. (EX 11)

When I was in my late 30s, I was in a retreat for 5 days just with myself in silence in a house over the ocean in Big Sur. I guess the story I would relate that could kind of help you or anyone kind of understand in words what happened, because it's very difficult for me, is you hear people talking about some sort of moment or experience, mystical experience, where they feel reborn. Where you have this, it's almost like a wiping out of who you were, and an emergence of someone that even to yourself, you're like, “I didn't used to be like this.” And it happens very fast, within moments of something very profound that you experience. I spent many hours of that retreat laying on a towel in the grass staring up at the sun – just like when I was a little kid – outside of this house in Big

Sur. That was a common link with being as a child as I was, I was down in the grass connected to the Earth and looking up at the sun and experiencing that kind of energy of nature. So that experience, I literally, it was like somebody reset my soul. (EX 4)

Retreats could certainly mean multiple things to exemplars: a time and place of respite and reprieve from interpersonal engagement, especially considering that exemplars are generative, work in professions oriented to the human condition, are married, and most have children. Exemplars' highest trait anxiety item was being "tired," and one of their highest items on the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS) was, "Other people say that I am a very productive person."

Retreats could also be a means by which exemplars revisit their vocations more deeply and specifically. Retreats could be places to have dedicated spiritual practice, as was mentioned by some exemplars (e.g., EX 11 and EX 16). They could be places to experience silence, or be near mentors and teachers. Retreats could also be containers, or holding environments, for letting go of the routines of daily living and being present in a sustained way to one's inner life.

A third finding potentially related to exemplars being part of larger creation was their second-most-frequently described method for learning wisdom: allowing wisdom to arise from a larger source, and learning access to that source:

And that – and I guess that's another argument for saying that wisdom is very much something that happens through you because so is love. It's like when you can let yourself be completely open and let go of your own biases and your own conditioning and your own need to hold yourself together, then both of those qualities can spontaneously emerge. And I think the true gift of spiritual awakening is the emergence of both of those qualities, when they're needed, or when there's, you know, it's not like you go around all the time feeling wise and loving. It's just that life responds to as needed with those qualities spontaneously . . . Then beginning to trust what arises spontaneously. (EX 9)

I think that simply the heart or spirit, if you want to use the Jungian term, the self in the larger "S," has a wisdom. It's amazing to me when I give up and let go what information comes to me; what direction I find to go. Say, a wise heart or movement inside of me that I have to constantly return to who, that gives me that. I don't think you can teach it; it comes out of the, it comes out of the experience of surrender. But that's a lifetime. (EX 17)

I think it's a matter of learning how to open one's self up to that. But you can teach the way to be aware and absorb, you know, the honoring of life and its wisdom. But it's not a commodity. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. It's not a commodity you can teach. It's something by the grace of life itself that can be incorporated but it's not an achievement . . . It's an incarnation. Not dissimilar from the Christian sense of incarnation of God and Jesus. So I really think it has a much broader metaphysical quality to it other than just the human accomplishment. (EX 11)

The significance of identifying oneself as non-separate from life resonates with several wisdom conceptions in the psychological literature. McKee and Barber's (1999) notion of



wisdom as “seeing through illusion” (p. 151) comes to mind, as does wisdom as insight based into the meaning of life (e.g., Ardelt, 2000a; Kekes, 1995). Achenbaum (2004) writes: “the wise, utilizing their abilities to look upon the universe from several planes, seek insights about how their true nature evolves within themselves” (p. 46). Wisdom as “profound insight into reality” seems possible (Trowbridge, 2007, *Cultivating a Wisdom Perspective*, para. 3). The transcendent wisdom notion of Le (2008b) also might apply: attainment of insight into reality. From Levitt’s (1999) study of Buddhist monks: “Learning the true nature of reality is both a final goal and part of developing wisdom” (p. 104). Ahmadi (1998) points out that in her study of Sufis, the individual self is not in fact separated from other than self. Trowbridge’s (2008) reference to the wisdom of the sages: To truly know yourself is to know all things. The point is, being one with all of creation is significant because it might be related to Sophia, “which is knowledge first of things, ultimate explanations and what follows from them, particularly in regard to human fulfillment” (Trowbridge, 2008, p. 44). Recognizing the communion of all life would certainly seem to be related to what follows regarding relative human fulfillment.

Perhaps then, exemplars’ speaking about a connection to oneness, or the whole of life, *is suggestive of transcendent wisdom*, although the psychological wisdom-related definitions of transcendent wisdom are, for the most part, not descriptive enough. What is meant by spiritual insight, or by perceiving reality? What does it mean that wisdom is potentially related to state spiritual development? Is wisdom its own particular lines (e.g., transcendent, practical) of development or the highest levels of multiple lines of development (Wilber, 2000)? Is self-development seemingly not necessary for *access* to certain types of wisdom, but is self-development/transcendence/awareness part of expressing wisdom cleanly? Perhaps state spirituality relates to perceiving reality, and self-development to interpreting and enacting what is realized in the world?

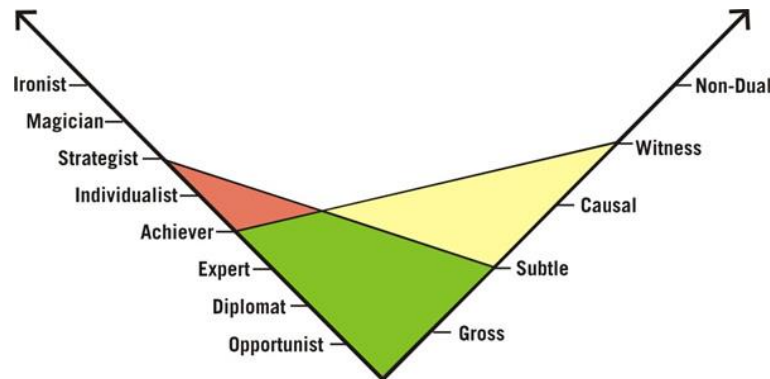
In general, the psychological wisdom-related research considers transcendent wisdom transpersonal and practical wisdom interpersonal. But what if transcendent and practical wisdom were *related in some way*? Certainly, it is one thing to *perceive* reality and quite another to *act* in accordance with that insight, or from that insight on a consistent basis. This potential connection between transcendent and practical wisdom is a very rare inquiry in the psychological wisdom literature of the past 35 years, with the exception of Aldwin (2009).

In our correspondence during the study, Terri O’ Fallon (personal communication, December 3, 2009) reflected on the relationship between state spirituality, stage development, and wisdom:

Many people have a wonderful spiritual life that makes them very, very wise, but it doesn’t mean that they are late developmentally. I have scored people that many have assumed were later level in their development and they tended mostly to be late in their state stages.

For example, they may not be able to see a long way out in time, or have a wide universal space field they live in. They may not be able to see general systems, and they may not be able to see certain aspects of polar opposites. They may not be able to see the construction of reality, or certain kinds of projections in the moment. None of these things are needed to be seen as very wise.

I realized that development has little to do with intelligence and for the most part, wisdom. So I had to have a meaning-making scheme that helped me understand this, and developed this model:



**Figure 1. O'Fallon developmental model.**

On the right side is the state stages in this V. On the left side are the developmental stages which I scored for you. If you draw a line from the developmental stage someone scores at, to the state (spiritual wisdom) stage they embody you can see that you can have an Achiever that has a triangular space (I call it “consciousness room to roam”) that is actually larger than the developmentally later Strategist, who has less wisdom!

I ran into this a number of times in the teaching I have been doing. Some people were incredibly wise even though they didn't have some of the developmental capacities of a later level. In this case, the Achiever has a yellow space to roam in that the Strategist doesn't have and the Strategist has the red space to roam in that the Achiever doesn't have.

(Ego) development doesn't necessarily measure wisdom. At the very latest stages wisdom does occur because you can't get there without later states but this isn't true for most levels.

O' Fallon (See Figure 1) seems to be suggesting that state spiritual development eclipses personal development when it comes to *accessing* wisdom, but what about *expressing* wisdom? Perhaps wisdom (transcendent) comes through (permeates) the state side of development and is implemented through, or in, the context of the stage side of development, which might account for wisdom being defined by exemplars as coming from the unknown and yet practical. Perhaps this perspective could also give credence to the idea of varying developmental *stage or type* expressions of wisdom, although the *source* from which wisdom arose was the same and was applied to the same context. In essence, individuals have access to wisdom, but they are not wisdom itself, and thus wisdom is theorized to develop through multiple pathways that work together synergistically (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).

O' Fallon's (2009) thinking that personal (ego) development is not necessarily related to wisdom is also congruent with the finding that exemplars are wise in different ways (e.g., lines),

and that their particular personalities (e.g., types) are not shed for wisdom to be present. Nor are exemplars' relative life experiences and knowledge:

I think of exemplars of wisdom, I think that they're a variety of different personalities that can be wise. And the other thing is I think people may be wise in different ways in different areas. Some people can be very wise in one area and not so wise in other areas. I don't expect that somebody, just because they're a teacher, for example, spiritual teacher, they may have a lot of wisdom in one area and none at all in other areas. And I think that that can be so disillusioning when somebody puts a teacher up on a pedestal and then they turn out to be less than perfect. And they always do, because we're all just human. So I wouldn't hang it on any particular quality except the sense of caring and respect. (EX 10)

And yet exemplars said:

When wisdom is being spoken, it's egoless, or wisdom is being demonstrated, there's nobody there intruding, in that sense. But there is a way somehow – and it may be different moment to moment. But I think when it shows up that there's a feeling. There's a sense of presence that something bigger than what's human is on board and it needs to be honored or listened to, or be servants to that. (EX 6)

Of relevance, perhaps, is what Levitt (1999) highlighted in her study as the main difference between the Tibetan Buddhist process of self-development and Western psychotherapeutic practices: the one puts forth the unreality of the individual self, and the other seeks a deeper understanding of this individual self – “Ego abandonment and ego strengthening” (p. 102). Trowbridge (2008) points out that Levitt (1999) suggests that psychotherapy and Buddhist philosophy “may be methods, grounded in the metaphysics of their cultures, to develop wisdom” (1999, p. 103).

In the psychological wisdom literature, ego strengthening and ego abandonment is generally separated as self-development and self-transcendence, respectively (Ardelt, 2003; Le, 2008b). Less spoken about, however, in this literature, is the possibility of developing awareness of a self that can then possibly be transcended and included.

One of the only theoretical and practical wisdom conceptions to consider a connection between developing a self and transcending the self is Robins (1998):

Wisdom is related not just to the expectations, beliefs and the consequent emotional reactions resulting from beliefs, but also to the cognitive, behavioral, physiological, interpersonal, familial and social components that originate from and contribute to beliefs, all of which intimately and dynamically interact and thus co-evolve together across our adult development. In addition to the development and treatment of the ego, and consistent with Buddhist Psychology (Epstein, 1995), Wisdom Therapy simultaneously aims to facilitate the transcendence of the ego. (Wisdom Therapy Institute, Goals, para. 1)

Importantly, a high percentage of exemplars in this study have Western psychotherapeutic training and experience, which is often concerned with self and other development. Many

exemplars also have longstanding Eastern spiritual traditions and practices, often associated with self-transcendence. The relationship between self-awareness and self-transcendence seems significant in discussing the relationship between stage development, state spirituality, and wisdom, and will be explored briefly. A critical limitation in this discussion, however, is that “self” and “ego” are not precisely differentiated in the study by exemplars (e.g., the separate ego/self-sense and the “egoic” organizing function).

## **Self-Awareness and Self-Transcendence**

In the psychological wisdom-related literature, developing a capacity for self-awareness and self-transcendence seems related to the reflective component of Ardel’s (2004a) model of wisdom: self-awareness, self-insight, self-examination, and the capacity to take multiple perspectives of phenomena (Ardelt, 2004a). Ardel contends this self-reflection practice informs an undistorted comprehension of reality by facilitating an awareness and transcendence of one’s projections and subjectivity.

Le (2008a) also spoke of wisdom as transcending the biases, subjectivity, and self-centeredness that are natural and pervasive in humans. She contends that wisdom is a developmental process that involves self-transcendence.

There are multiple findings in this study that relate to exemplars self-awareness and self-transcending capacities.

### **Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)**

Exemplars’ higher than normative mindfulness scores on the MAAS is supportive of self-awareness and self-transcendence. The MAAS assesses a core characteristic of dispositional mindfulness—namely, open or receptive awareness of and attention to what is taking place in the present. Kabat-Zinn (1990) claimed this kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality. This finding is significant for two reasons. First, it suggests exemplars strong valuation of receptive awareness to what is taking place in the present moment. And second, it seems that attending to what is actually happening in the present moment would precede the capacity to respond intimately to it, or to transcend it.

On the MAAS, however, high scores offer little insight into exemplars’ subjectivity, especially because the stems are negatively worded. Mindfulness also has not been studied in the psychological wisdom-related research, so a degree of reservation in my meaning making is prudent.

### **Valuation of Self-Awareness and Self-Contact**

Another finding supporting self-awareness and self-transcending capacities is exemplars’ valuation of self-awareness and self-contact. Sixty percent of exemplars reported tracking sensations, creating spaciousness around emotions, witnessing thoughts, and staying in touch with moment-to-moment arisings. This finding offers insight into exemplars’ subjective notions

of mindfulness, mentioned earlier, and is thought to contribute to a clearer view of subjectivity and the minimization of projection:

Well, I think it's the gradual strengthening of the faculty of awareness, you know, and self-awareness so that just over the years I've become kind of increasingly mindful of just the different patterns that are going on in my mind in thoughts and emotions. And through the seeing of them more clearly, it becomes easier to, at least a good part of the time, certainly not all the time, but a good part of the time, choosing to act on those that bring about well being and letting those go that seem to bring about suffering. So it all comes out of awareness and self-awareness. (EX 15)

I'm experiencing everything from the pressure of one leg on another, to a background feeling of pleasure, to pure awareness witnessing the same, witnessing it. And everything in between. It's interesting. I'm just watching the mental process of responding to this. It's like there's a boundless array of perspectives and possibilities. So it's a process of either selecting for any number of reasons one particular perspective or sitting back and allowing some aphoristic response, almost poetic response to attempt to encapsulate the many dimensions. (EX 16)

The other thing that's meaningful for me is just trying to stay in contact with what's happening to me. What am I experiencing? Kind of trying to refer back to that and check in with it. Then also just allowing myself time to process whatever's going on [pauses], and to try to give it some spaciousness [pauses], and see what's really going on. (EX 20)

### **Meditative Practices**

A third related finding to exemplars' development of self-awareness and self-transcendence is the high prevalence and importance of exemplars' meditative practices. Twelve exemplars (60%) cited practicing various types of meditation, and within that group, eight practiced meditation for 25 years or more. Fifty percent of the total exemplar group also reported having multiple spiritual practices.

Without exemplars clearly defining what is meant by meditation, however, it is hard to speak uniformly to its effects. One exemplar said of meditation, "it increasingly gives you access to lots of inner processes, inner spiritual processes" (EX 11), while others commented on the value of meditation in their lives for focusing, as an awareness practice, and for emotional regulation. Other potential reasons for the high prevalence of meditation could be the age related overlap with a natural time of contemplation in life as well as exemplars' religious and spiritual affiliations.

### **Combined Qualities**

A fourth finding potentially related to exemplars' self-awareness and self-transcending capacities is their combined qualities of openness to experience, humility, and low state and trait anxiety. Exemplars scored highly on openness to experience and humility, both of which were

correlated significantly and positively with wisdom. Exemplars also scored lower than the norm on state and trait anxiety.

Openness to experience was defined, in part, as avoiding narrow-mindedness and self-deception (Webster, 2007). Humility was defined as a non-defensive willingness to see the self accurately, including strengths and limitations (Exline, 1999). The lowest-scoring item on the humility scale was, “I feel slighted when I don’t get the attention I should,” suggesting exemplars have some degree of freedom from other-oriented self-esteem, or at least value it. In relationship to others, exemplars’ freedom from needing to have their self-esteem enhanced by others is significant, as it allows the possibility of exemplars seeing beyond their own needs, and potentially being free to receive someone else.

Regarding state and trait anxiety, in situations where relationships are involved, self-esteem is challenged, or failure is experienced, people with high trait anxiety tend to react with higher levels of state anxiety. Implied in this previous reaction is that high trait-anxiety people may have a fairly rigid internalized self-concept as compared to someone whose self-concept is supple/fluid enough to accommodate being inadequate, failing, or looking bad (Butlein, 2005). Perhaps exemplars’ openness to experience, a humble, non-defensive willingness to see the self accurately, and low trait and state anxiety combined to allow a less guarded, more transparent or fluid self-concept, resulting in reduced self-centeredness and projection. The result is more presence and availability to themselves and others.

### **Wisdom-Related Strategies**

A fifth finding relating to exemplars’ self-awareness and self-transcending capacities is exemplars’ strategies, or technologies, for learning wisdom-related information. The third-most-reported theme for learning wisdom-related material, behind mentors and letting wisdom arise, was “decentering” attention from the thinking mind, suggesting a larger source than just the individual is responsible for the genesis of wisdom:

You can only point. You can only point to a way of holding something that’s bigger than the mind. When you stop paying attention to your mind it stops being such a bother. When you stop taking it so seriously. When a thought comes through and you just look at it and say, whoa, that’s interesting. Wonder where that one came from. But you don’t buy into it and create a big story around it. Pretty soon that function stops functioning in the way it does when you really believe you are your thoughts. I think that most of the time we humans think we are our thoughts. (EX 9)

Overall, that exemplars could both develop awareness of a self and potentially transcend the developed self is significant. First, it would seem to give exemplars access to their own relative development as human beings. Relative awareness is important in cultivating freedom from self-centeredness, projections, and subjectivity, offering increased presence to oneself, others, and the world.

Second, self-awareness and self-transcendence would seem to make more likely the capacity for exemplars to relatively embody, or live day to day, their arising insight of being one with the

all of creation. In this way, perhaps exemplar's particular personalities and relative stage development are like a prism through which wisdom passes, potentially clarifying or muddling wisdom's enactment in a context. By becoming aware of the relative stage related interpretive lens of what is realized, exemplars can translate and impart the insight as clearly as possible into the world.

### **Summary: Some Meaning Making and Integration**

In the closing moments of my interview with Exemplar 2, he likened religious traditions to the Chinese lantern, a metaphor that has since become a (meta) perspective reflective of my understanding and discussion of wisdom exemplars:

Think of religious traditions as an eight-sided Chinese lantern and in the middle, there's a candle. You don't know where the light comes from but the light is filtered through those various colors of glass. All those colors of glass, all those pieces of glass are manmade. They distort the light. Now, there are a few that are more transparent than others . . . But all major religions are just like those glass in the lantern. What's the light? You don't know what it is. That's where you come to your mystery again. But you are perfectly free to assess any human construction of any kind once you know about it, once you learn about it. But you have to learn about all of the glass, not just the one. You see? (EX 2)

Perhaps exemplars are akin to the stained glass in the eight-sided lantern, and in the middle is the light of wisdom. For multiple reasons found in this research, exemplars are able to filter the light of wisdom (from a state accessed source) through their humanity into the world with less distortion and more transparency than the average human being.

### **Exemplar Connection to Source, Ground, or Spirit**

Like the inner sides of the glass, exemplars have cultivated, or have been graced with a (state based) receptivity to the source and radiance of wisdom, whatever wisdom is. Exemplars' longstanding practices of meditation, valuation of mindfulness, and attending retreats; relationships with mentors; and long term-experience with multiple religious traditions and spiritual practices are all thought to be related to this capacity to access wisdom.

Exemplars' notions of wisdom also support a receptive element of wisdom. Forty percent of exemplars talked about learning wisdom as a letting go, surrendering, and experiencing an incarnation from something larger than the individual. Wisdom was also defined by exemplars as coming from the unknown, and *access* to wisdom can be pointed to and cultivated:

Wisdom is something by the grace of life itself that can be incorporated but it's not an achievement . . . It's an incarnation. Not dissimilar from the Christian sense of incarnation of God and Jesus. So I really think it has a much broader metaphysical quality to it other than just the human accomplishment. And teach, I think, how one can receive it, but you can't teach wisdom. Nobody ever truly has fully incorporated wisdom. It's much bigger than the individual. (EX 11)

For me (wisdom) is what arises when I admit that I really don't know anything. It's like something that comes spontaneously from being willing to sit in the not knowing. And having no personal agenda. So that whatever movement happens is happening almost through you rather than from you. It's being willing not to be attached to your ideas. It doesn't mean that what you know or you've learned or you've experienced isn't useful, because in a way that, for me, that integrates with this other kind of intuitive knowing. But it's sort of like letting the flow arise rather than going at it from an analytical perspective or a memory perspective. I don't know. I guess I think of wisdom as kind of a universal quality that pops up once in awhile in anybody. And it's coming from some other source in a way. So it plays through us when we're not overly involved in our concerns. (EX 9)

Exemplars' recognition of wisdom as incarnational, or coming from another source, is similar to the notions of transcendent wisdom put forth in previous literature. Transcendent wisdom is associated with "interest and skill in the transpersonal domain" (Wink & Helson, 1997, p. 12) insight into reality (Le 2008b, Trowbridge (2008); seeing through illusion, wisdom as a priori, or derived from intuitive insight (Barber & Mckee, 1999); and transcending the personal, is insightful, and demonstrates spiritual depth (Wink & Dillon, 2002). Transcendent wisdom could also be part of what Trowbridge (2008) refers to in his sense of one's ability to perceive reality, reflected in Exemplar 9:

What it does is it ends the seeker when you recognize the truth. It just eliminates that. You realize you're not there. There's nobody really there. There's only a set of experiences. And that you are this – that what I am and what you are, there's absolutely no difference at the core. Every living thing is the same thing. It also eliminates any tendency to think that you're different than anyone else because everyone else is this too. It's just totally obvious. And so it just kind of ends the journey. (EX9)

Spirituality is thought to be related to this insight. Sixty-five percent of exemplars spoke about the spiritual as being inseparable from the wholeness of life, and the same percentage of exemplars expressed having a reflective articulation process through which they have access to an intuitive awareness out of which come creative and spontaneous images, words, and concepts relevant to their current context.

Almost all exemplars valued the importance of spirituality in their life as measured by the Spiritual Perspective Scale (SPS), which was also positively and significantly correlated with wisdom. The highest stem on the SPS was, "Spirituality has played an important role in my life." Eighty-five percent of exemplars reported having a current religious or spiritual tradition; 80% had spiritual practices; 50% have more than one spiritual practice; and 55% attended retreats.

### **Relative, Reflective Self-Awareness**

The lantern glass itself is conceived of as exemplars' relative stage development and conditioned identity. Exemplars' valuation of, and capacity for, self-awareness and self-reflection is thought to relate to an awareness of their own self-knowledge and development. To varying degrees, exemplars are able to see and assess within themselves their own human,



cultural, developmental obstacles to clear and continuous/ or abiding access to source. Metaphorically, this increasing self-transparency and permeability allows light to flow from the inside of the lantern out through the glass with minimal distortion.

This capacity for self-awareness is similar to the Le and Levenson (2005) conceptualization of self-transcendence, or “the ability to move beyond self-centered consciousness and to see things as they are with clear awareness of human nature and human problems, and with a considerable measure of freedom from biological and social conditioning” (2005, p. 444).

The capacity of exemplars to mindfully witness and potentially facilitate their own development (moment-to-moment experiences) is also similar to the reflective component of Ardel’s (2004a) model of wisdom: self-awareness, self-insight, self-examination, and the capacity to take multiple perspectives of phenomena (Ardelt, 2004a). This self-reflection practice informs an undistorted comprehension of reality by facilitating an awareness and transcendence of one’s projections and subjectivity.

Related present study findings include: exemplars’ valuation of self-contact and self-awareness, higher than normative mindfulness scores; learning wisdom as decentering from thinking; technologies for learning wisdom as ego-deconstructive; high resonance with the Humility Inventory; and lower than normative state and trait anxiety. The fact that many exemplars are psychotherapists or counselors points to the direct engagement of exemplars with professions oriented to the human condition, many of which are related to developing self-knowledge. Exemplars being predominantly psychotherapists and counselors may also reflect the professional community from which nominators were found.

### **Conscious Expression**

The outer edge of the lantern glass is conceived of as exemplars’ conscious relationship with others and with the world. Exemplars’ interpersonal relationships likely align with what the psychological wisdom literature considers practical wisdom. Practical wisdom was defined as skill and interest in the interpersonal domain (Wink & Helson, 1997), facilitating the optimal development of self and others (Webster, 2007), living a good life in society (Le, 2008b) and the ability to make good choices regarding human affairs (Trowbridge, 2008).

The high importance and prevalence of exemplars’ loving relationships, valuation of truth-telling, higher than normative generativity scores, multiple avenues of generativity, deep connections with others, being sought out for counsel, and roles as educators, therapists, and spiritual teachers all are supportive findings.

### **Conclusion**

When there is some degree of development/accessibility for exemplars in all three areas – (a) spiritual insight (transcendent wisdom): or a deep receptive potential to or recognition as (and as) the unknown source of light; (b) self-awareness/ self-knowledge/ self-transcendence or an awareness of relative humanness; and (c) conscious engagement, or interpersonal accessibility

in relationships/contexts (practical wisdom) – wisdom can flow through and permeate exemplars’ humanness, responding to the arising contexts of life with minimal distortion.

Exemplars’ reflective articulation process, acting in the world as luminaries and visionaries, making life decisions intuitively, and experiencing oneness with all of life seem reflective of this connection between transcendent and practical wisdom, embodied through exemplars, understood through the use of the lantern metaphor. Ultimately, exemplars – momentarily, or, perhaps, in an abiding way – seem to become aware as, and of, both their immanence (humanity) and transcendence (divinity), such that both impact the world with practicality.

While the spiritual perspectives reflective in the findings of the study place the current research in the minority of psychological wisdom-related research of the last 35 years, it is worth noting the observations of Trowbridge (2008):

1. The divine, religious aspects of wisdom have been mainly ignored by psychologists.
2. Wisdom cannot separate itself from religion or questions of ultimate meaning, so long as what is wise is connected with judgments regarding what is best for men and women.
3. The traditional understanding of wisdom cannot be simply accepted.

## Final Thoughts

What seems most important about wisdom is that it is alive. It is not a prescription. It can use multiple pathways of knowing. It arises from things we already know and will birth insights that otherwise would never come, in response to the unique context we are in. We will both feel out of the way and deeply intimate in relationship. Wisdom reveals the truth of the moment, but is not necessarily validated in a moment of understanding.

Wisdom is paradoxical. It requires doing and being, is meditative and generative. Wisdom arises both alone and in communion.

Perhaps, then, wisdom is expressed, or is translated, through many personal developmental lenses. Whatever developmental perspective is interpreting and enacting wisdom, recognizing when one is speaking from a personal place versus allowing wisdom to use the personal, is incredibly useful. But maybe that recognition is not necessary at all, or is in itself part of development, accessible and useful in some contexts and not in others. Ultimately, perhaps the word wisdom is just another referent to a process, a capacity that must be lived in order to be alive.

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Understanding wisdom involves taking the wise off their pedestal, and seeing wisdom as a set of processes that we can all tap into. By Alex Fradera. Proponents of teaching wisdom suggest that this teaching could be framed around exemplars – wise figures from the past. Grossman is in favour of this, but suggests that the road to wisdom comes not from treating these figures as peerless exemplars, but as successes within a social context, and by comparing and contrasting where their wisdom apparently reached its limits and why. This is captured by the Solomon Paradox, named after the great Jewish king who also boasted of his riches and ill-prepared his son to succeed him. Words of wisdom. Thank you for interesting and thought-provoking text. LikeLike. In leadership, life and all things it's far wiser to judge people by their deeds than their speech - their track record rather than their talk – Rasheed Ogunlaru – Rasheed Ogunlaru. tags: action-quotes, actions-speak-louder-than-words, being-true-to-your-word, being-truthful, confidence, decision-making, decision-quotes, deeds, inspiring-quotes, judgement, judgement-quotes, motivational-quotes, rasheed-ogunlaru, rasheed-ogunlaru-quotes, speech, taking-action, trust, trustworthy, wisdom, wise-words, words, words-and-deeds, words-of-wisdom. 13 likes. Like. We must learn to grow and evolve into a stronger, wiser and better version of ourselves. Life occurs in stages and taking a step at a time is key to learning and growing. – Kemi Sogunle.