



## VAN FORUM NOTES

December 13, 2005  
“Collecting Your Wisdom”

“Only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over to annihilation can that which is indestructible be found in us.”

— Pema Chodron in *When Things Fall Apart*

**Introduction.** Carol Daly, member of the VAN Leadership Group, welcomed participants and introduced the topic of the day by posing the question “what do you think of when you hear the word ‘wisdom’?” Participants were asked to introduce themselves and answer the question.

Participants responded with:

- I think of Grandpa Owen who died when I was eight. I recently placed his picture on my coffee table because I was in need of strength to deal with a stressful situation.
- An old woman. I didn’t have grandparents. My mother lived to be the oldest person in my family and she died when she was 76.
- I retired one week and three days ago. I think that wisdom is a process and a hard one, it is not a natural consequence of growing old.
- Listening.
- An image of an older person – someone older than myself.
- I thought of a couple people that I have worked for and that I feel are very wise.
- An accumulation of knowledge and knowing what to do with it.
- An old Asian person or American Indian.
- Street smart – smartness based on experience. I think also of a group that I facilitate called “Wise, Wonderful Women.” The youngest member is 82 years old. They are so wise that I could write a book about these women and call it “Everything that I Know I’ve Learned From These Women.”
- Depth and understanding – I don’t think it necessarily connects with age. My three-year-old granddaughter has said some pretty wise things.
- I feel that it has something to do with aging. As my kids get older (they are now 19 and 23) they are beginning to see me as wise.
- Image of Gandalf in the Lord of the Rings movie.
- I believe there are wise people in all age ranges.
- Other cultures that really honor elders for their wisdom.
- I think of myself in terms of my wisdom and I feel that it’s up to me to share it – we are developing a co-housing community and our logo says “it’s about wisdom not aging.”

- When I was working my co-workers would say “you’re so wise” and I would think “what is that?” I thought I would have to be really old, but I kind of associate it with commonsense.
- My very simple not very educated parents who were role models for me, it’s a gift that some people get and that some people don’t.
- Wisdom as perspective – the ability to take the long view and the ability to see life in terms of cycles.
- Being learned and street smart at the same time, being able to glean information from books or people and applying it to getting along and functioning well throughout the lifespan.
- Having peace within yourself. Being wise enough to know not to get hung up on different things. Wise people say things in a few words.
- Being able to recognize wisdom when it is before me.
- I was peaceful when I was focusing on wisdom so I think of it more as a state than a thought.
- Looking back and learning from an accumulation of life experiences as well as looking ahead and seeking new knowledge and new relationships.
- Being an elder, although that is just one component.
- Wisdom comes with all ages, everyone has some wisdom. Wisdom is gained through life experiences, how you use them and how you can teach other people and pass it on.
- I hope wisdom is connected with aging and achieving a balanced perspective.
- Wisdom is something I’m always seeking and feeling that I will never have enough.

Carol noted that this is the first VAN forum for seven participants. She offered them a special greeting.

Carol introduced Carrie Bassett, founder and director of The Wisdom Institute. Carrie has been studying and writing about wisdom for almost ten years. Carol has heard Carrie speak on a couple of occasions and enjoyed her so much that she volunteered to host this session. Carol noted that Carrie recently co-taught a class for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) on wisdom and received very high marks on her evaluations.

Carrie encouraged participants to become members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. She is going to be the teaching assistant for her dance instructor who will be teaching a tango class during the Winter session. During the Spring session she will be teaching a wisdom class.

### **Dramatization**

Carrie began her presentation by providing a dramatization of her understanding of wisdom. First, Carol handed out a small golden apple (a brass bell) to each participant to be used for voting in the dramatization. Carol then asked a participant to pick one color of four displayed on the front table.

The participant picked the color red. Carrie put on a hat and red scarf and began to tell a story. She announced that she was one of the hand maidens of Sophia, the Goddess of Wisdom. She told participants that they will get a chance to vote on which story they like the best of the four that she and her sisters will tell by putting their golden apples in the basket associated with their favorite story.

Red story: “Parsifal went on a long journey through the forest. He got lost at the edge of forest. He saw a lake and an island on the lake. A raft came up and he got in. It brought him to the island. The drawbridge was down, and he went right into the castle. The people took him to the king. The king was shivering by the fire even though it was summer because he had been badly injured, and his wound was gangrenous. But he could not die because he had to be in the presence, at all times, of the Holy Grail. The king gave Parsifal a sword and Parsifal left the room. When he woke up the next morning, it was very quiet – nobody was there. He left the island and was very puzzled. Later, in the forest, he saw an old woman cradling a dying knight. She told him joyfully that he had healed the king by asking the right question. But, Parsifal had not asked the king a question. The old woman was disappointed. A long time later after wandering through the forest for many years, he came upon a hermit. Parsifal stayed with him to learn what question he was supposed to ask. Finally, he went back to the king to see if he could ask the right question. He strode in to where the king was again huddling by the fire in the heat of the summer and took off his helmet. Parsifal dropped to his knee and took the king’s hand in his, asking him, “Sire, what ails thee?” And that was the right question! This story is about compassion and empathy – Parsifal needed to be mature enough to know that you have to think of somebody else besides yourself.”

Another participant picked the color blue. Carrie came out wearing the hat and a blue scarf. She hoped that the participants would agree that her story exemplifies the most important aspect of wisdom.

Blue story: “In Phrygia in Greece a man named Gordius came in on an ox cart and tied it to the column of the temple to Zeus. He became the ruler of Phrygia because an oracle said that whoever tied their ox cart to the temple column would become king. He tied it to the column with a big knot to symbolize the importance of an oracle. Another oracle said that whoever undid the knot would be the ruler of all the world. Many men tried to undo the knot and failed. Many years later, a young man named Alexander came to town and, like the others, he tried unsuccessfully to undo the knot. Suddenly, clarity came to him. He took his sword and cut the knot right in two – he cut the Gordian knot. This means that he could see clearly what was going on, that *untying* the knot would not work but *undoing* it in another way would—so he cut it. When we talk today of cutting the Gordian Knot, we mean seeing a situation in a different way that allows us to solve a problem directly.”

Another participant picked the color green. Carrie came out wearing the hat and a green scarf. She told the participants that she was one of the hand maidens of Sophia, the Goddess of Wisdom. She said that she will tell a tale and it will without doubt exemplify for the participants the most important component of wisdom.

Green story: “After the Titans created the world, Zeus asked two brothers to create the creatures of the earth and give them appropriate gifts. One brother, named Epimethius (which means afterthought), jumped right in and created fish with scales, creatures with claws, creatures with fangs, animals who are swift or strong, who fly or crawl fast, and so on. He gave all of the gifts to all of the animals except for human beings! He turned shamefacedly to his brother, Prometheus (which means forethought) for help. On Mount Olympus there was fire, but it was only for the use of the gods. One night, Prometheus went up to the top of Mount Olympus and took a flaming torch and gave it to human beings. Think how powerful a gift that this was. Fire is used for protection and cooking and heat and energy (even in your car) and making iron into steel, for example. Giving such a powerful gift is the aspect of wisdom that relates to action – knowing what’s right and what’s right to do and actually doing it.”

Another participant picked the color gold. Carrie came out wearing the hat and a gold scarf. She told participants that she was one of the hand maidens of Sophia, the Goddess of Wisdom. She will tell a tale that exemplifies the most important aspect of wisdom.

Gold story: “Once in olden times there was a nymph named Daphne. Her father was a river god. Daphne loved the woods and she ran there all day. One day at the edge of the woods a shepherd started to follow her. She kept moving away. The shepherd told her, “I’m a god – I’m Apollo.” But Daphne still didn’t want him to take her. He kept getting closer and closer. He was about to seize her when Daphne saw that she was at the river bank and she called out to her father, the river, to save her. At that moment, Daphne’s feet sank into the ground, her body went stiff, leaves appeared at the tips of her fingers and she became a laurel tree. Apollo declared that even though she escaped from him as a woman she would become his tree. Laurel is the sign of triumph. And you know the saying, “Don’t rest on your laurels – keep on working.” For Daphne and for us this is about integrity. She was not going to do anything she didn’t want to. She knew herself and her values and was going to stick by them.”

The participants voted for the story they felt exemplified the most important aspect of wisdom. The results were:

Blue story (discerning, seeing clearly) – 3 votes;

Red story (compassion, empathy, respecting) – 13 votes;

Green story (action, engaging) – 3 votes; and

Gold story (integrity, knowing yourself and growing deeper, transforming) – 8 votes

Carrie asked the participants why they made the choices they did.

- Those who chose Blue/Discerning felt that it underlay the other features and was fundamental to the other components.
- Those who chose Red/Respecting felt that if you take a moment to empathize with a person and speak from their point of reference, then you can share your wisdom – it is the foundation for the others. The idea was that Parsifal was becoming more human and that’s what we’re striving for when we want to become wise. Others who did not vote for this component thought that compassion can come earlier in life. They felt

that wisdom is usually associated with age and for good reason because it is a process of learning throughout life.

- Those who chose Green/Engaging felt that it was about sharing of information and sharing your story. One participant felt that as an artist and a woman that engaging is connectivity and being active. She felt it is important to relate to other people.
- Those who chose Gold/Transforming voted for it because of the word integrity that is used to define it. They voted for it because it has to do with knowing yourself. The other components are part of the process of knowing yourself.

In response to a question about the work of Carol Gilligan on gender differences (justice vs. caring), Carrie indicated that she has noticed differences by gender. Typically, more men prefer Discerning and women prefer Respecting.

Carrie asked participants for feedback on the stories. One participant liked the story involving fire because it provided a clear image. She also indicated that the terms for the wisdom components do not relate to the stories. Another participant noted that the Discerning story left her with a lot of questions. She did not understand the relationship between the sword and the knot. Another participant agreed and said that she had heard of the term Gordian knot but did not know what it meant. Carrie clarified that Gordian knot is a term used to refer to a big problem that individuals try to solve in traditional ways. When they solve the problem by thinking and acting outside of the box that is called ‘cutting the Gordian knot.’

At the end, Carrie told the group the “right” answer to which tale is the best embodiment of wisdom—they all are, and none can be separated from the other.

### **Emergent Wisdom**

Carrie shared with the group a diagram titled “Emergent Wisdom,” which is based on her research. The diagram shows that all four components of wisdom are important, and you cannot be wise without mastering each component. “Emergent” wisdom means that it is more than the sum of its parts, not static, comes from the ground up, it is happening but not complete. The diagram is available on her website at [www.wisdominst.org](http://www.wisdominst.org) in the section entitled Wisdom.

Carrie shared a chart on Emergent Wisdom with the group. The chart is a result of many years of work conducting interviews and reading the literature. This is how all of the information has come together for her. This chart is also available on Carrie’s website.

- For each of the four major dimensions Carrie has indicated
  - Chief characteristics,
  - Proficiencies;
  - Manifestations; and
  - Developmental stimuli/learning prompts.
- Discerning (cognitive) – understanding, knowing what is true and what is important.

- Respecting (affective) – connecting with the heart, multiple perspective-taking, expanded sphere of consideration – being aware of and caring about what happens to other people, animals, plants, things, etc.
- Engaging (active) – sound judgment and good advice, moral courage, committed action for the common good – wisdom is about us, the common good.
- Transforming (reflective) – integrity, knowing yourself and accepting yourself, perspective on self as part of system, knowing you’re just part of a lifecycle – this de-centers the ego. Embracing the paradox of uncertainty.

Carrie uses the image of a tree to illustrate wisdom and the four inter-related components:

- Discerning is the tree trunk
- Respecting is the leaves
- Engaging is the fruit from the tree that grow into new trees
- Transforming is the roots

Carrie provided a definition of wisdom: a deep understanding of the human condition engaged for the common good.

### **Group Exercises**

**Exercise #1:** Carol passed out a yellow worksheet that Carrie had prepared to the participants. The first side contained two questions that participants were asked to answer first by themselves.

1. What’s an important idea or value that you would like to pass on to someone younger than yourself?
2. Where did this idea come from? How did you get it?

Participants shared their answers with another person that they did not know. Some participants’ responses included:

- Her father died when she was nine. She lived in a large, poor family. She learned the value of giving by seeing her mother giving even with having very little. Her parents engaged her in delivering meals and otherwise interacting with people who had less than she had.
- The important thing is to truly listen – with the head and the heart and without any preconceived ideas. This idea came from knowing that I needed to learn to do it.
- Always leave a relationship, place, experience, work better than you found it.
- Being considerate and having compassion for other people. She learned this from her home environment.
- Participants learned these ideas from parents who were role models, something that grandpa wrote to her, seeing others act as we do not want to, knowing that she didn’t have a certain value and wanted to have it.

**Exercise #2:** The participants were asked to turn to the back side of the yellow sheet. This page contained two questions. Participants were asked to brainstorm answers in groups of four.

1. How do people become wise?

2. Write down all the ideas you can think of.  
(It might help if you think of someone you know personally who is wise. How did that person get to be the way he or she is?)

Group responses to “how do people become wise?” included:

- Travel
- Experience
- Role models
- Reading (“The Kite Runner”)
- Failure
- Thinking
- Feeling
- Relate to the “other” (cultures)
- Innate
- Arts (expand mind)
- Trials and tribulations
- Difficulties
- Spiritual quest
- Animals
- Nature (experiences with)
- Living life to the fullest
- Common sense – do women have more common sense than men?
- Being observant, curious (travel, reading, etc.)
- Modeling things you’ve seen, choosing how you act
- Having a mentor who guides the way
- Suffering, adversity, or failure and reflecting on this experience
- Listening to self and others is part of reflection
- Finding a faith
- Everybody has the capacity for wisdom at all ages
- Focus and intentionality, desire, risking, reaching and searching
- Stopping to make meaning from these experiences
- Understands the meaning of life and what matters – person is detached from stuff, title, and role – their power is more personal
- Purposefully putting oneself into new situations that might be uncomfortable and challenging
- Do not equate education with wisdom
- Sometimes it’s the reaction to something that is missing
- Receiving makes givers – learning to ask for help, for what you need
- Ethics – integrating into practice
- I was just at a conference with 400 teenagers. The people at the hotel reported that they did not have one incident of disrespect or trouble. Three were Katrina survivors. One of those boys changed schools in Houston to go on the right path. Who is someone for whom you are a role model? Everyone has something wise to pass on to someone else.

Carrie provided the group with a way to bring all of this information together and put it into action in their daily lives. The following three questions should be asked as much as possible in new situations.

1. What is really going on?
2. Whose interests do I have in mind?
3. What guides my decisions and actions?

**Join VAN at the next forum:**

Tuesday, January 10, 2006

10 a.m. – 12 p.m.

“The Art of Relationships: Creating a Memoir with Someone You Love”

Bernie Saunders, Center for Living Art

DARTS Offices, 1645 Marthaler Lane, West St. Paul