

WISE OLD MEN, SMART YOUNG PEOPLE

I don't know about you, but I love getting mail. Not e-mail, though that's OK too, rather good old fashioned snail-mail. I even open up the envelopes from credit card companies!

Usually my mail is addressed to John H. Danner. Sometimes it's to the Rev. John H. Danner—and occasionally the Rev. Dr. John H. Danner. But most times it's just plain John. This week, though, I got an envelope addressed to "Pepa Danner". That's what my grandsons call me, "Pepa"—so I knew it must be a Father's Day card. I love being a grandfather—I love being, at least from their perspective, one of the old men in my grandchildren's lives.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about the old men in my life. Especially the wise old men. And I've been thinking how grateful I am for what they've shared with me over the years.

I think of my mother's father, Grandpa Sherwood. I was only seven when Grandpa died, but I still remember the letters he used to write me, with stories about a bear, and little pictures drawn in the margins. Grandpa's education was interrupted when he was called up to serve during World War I. And later he struggled mightily as the Depression took its toll on his life. But despite his troubles, he always made time for a good book, he worked hard, and he was a wonderful Dad to my mother. Grandpa used to say, "Being wise isn't about knowing some particular information, it's about knowing how to find it."

Another wise old man in my life was Earl Kent Brown. Kent, as he preferred to be called, was my PhD mentor. The first time I met him I found him in his office, with his feet up on his desk, wearing cowboy boots. He was a well-regarded church historian, but he refused to fit stereotypes. He was one of the smartest people I've ever known, but you'd never know it to look at him. He always made you feel smart by asking the right questions, by helping you to probe more deeply. And Kent was able to connect the esoteric matters of church history to modern realities. One didn't just study the past—one learned from it to live a better life in the present.

And then there was George Stedman. George was one of my parishioners in New Jersey. George was a veteran of World War II. He was posted in the Pacific, and while in Australia, met his future wife Candy. In her prime Candy was a wonderfully creative artist. Her fiery red hair reflected her personality. But when I knew Candy and George, her hair had gone grey, and her mind had dimmed. Candy was often confused—and would sometimes wander off. She'd show up in the church parlor once in a while, not knowing where she was. Eventually George had to stay with her 24/7. He tenderly cared for her every need, even though she often didn't know who he was. Many folks would resent being tied down as he was, but George loved Candy deeply. "What else can I do?" he once told me. "It's not her fault she's like this." He wisely accepted the realities of his life, and made the best of it. I'll never forget the day he told me about his prayer life. He'd often get woken in the night by

Candy's needs, but after taking her to the bathroom, or settling her down, he'd lie in his bed and release his concerns to God in prayer.

Grandpa, Kent and George were all old men, when they entered my life. None of them were rich, all of them faced difficulties and challenges, but all of them were very content—and all of them were incredibly wise. And because of that, they were respected and admired by those around them. They exemplified what the writer of Proverbs was talking about when he said, "Get wisdom . . . Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you . . . she will bestow on you a beautiful crown." (Proverbs 4:7b, 8a, 9b)

But what is wisdom? And where can it be acquired? Grandpa, Kent and George provide us with examples of those who are wise—but what is wisdom itself?

Wisdom, as spoken of in Proverbs, is that which results from the marriage, so to speak, of obedience to God and our natural abilities to think and reason. We might think of wisdom as divinely guided common sense.

Perhaps a clue lies in an observation made by Albert Einstein: "Wisdom" he said, "is not a product of schooling, but of the lifelong attempt to acquire it."

Grandpa, Kent and George were all good students. Kent had his doctorate—George was an engineer—my grandfather graduated from Harvard. But it wasn't their educations that made them wise. It was their living.

Three years ago, some of the young men and women we are honoring today, stood before us to be confirmed. I decided to rummage through my files to find their statements of faith. Three years is a long time in a teenager's life, and much about their beliefs may have changed since then. Soon they will have their high school diplomas, and move on to college. They have gained a great deal of knowledge in those three years. But I hope they understood that true wisdom is not a product of schooling, but rather of living. Certainly the wisdom expressed in those statements reflected more about living than formal classes!

Listen again to some of what some of them had to say back in the spring of 2004.

Liz recounted a trip she'd taken to Italy. There she had visited St. Peter's Basilica, and spent time in the Sistine Chapel. "I realized that if Christians built this majestic structure for God, then he must be present in our lives. . . . As I gazed at the ceiling . . . I became part of a pilgrimage. I must have stayed . . . for more than one hour until I was able to associate every Bible scheme painted in sequence." It's not that her formal learning was unimportant, but it was in this life experience that it was truly made real!

Emily took up the issue of grief in her statement. She noted that the world can be a harsh place. Being with others can help to ease our grief, she said, and brings some warmth into the world. But she also noted she had experienced "moments of happiness as well. The

sound of a child laughing,” She wrote, “a hug of a friend, the warm summer rain, the smell of spring; these [are] things that make life worth living. I believe that God creates hardships to make us stronger, while rewarding us with simple things” Wise words for one so young!

Jessica used a wonderful analogy to describe her learning: “I have learned” she wrote, “ that religion, at least to most people, is like a radio. There are many different stations, which are like the different faiths practiced around the world. You can tune the radio louder to hear a message clearly, or play it softlyI have discovered that to truly be faithful to my religion, I must tune in often.” Might we all be listening!

Kenny offered up a powerful description of belief that grew out of his own experience: “To me believing is [about] something or someone that you trust and know they are going to tell you the truth. For some people seeing is believing, but not for most Christians. As a Christian you don’t have to see things like God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit but I know in my heart they are there.”

That year’s confirmation class walked the labyrinth, just as this year’s class did. And for Nick, it proved a vital experience that taught him a powerful truth. “The first time I went through it with everyone else, I felt as though we were moving at a very rapid pace, faster than I would have liked to go, but I went at the same pace anyway. After going through I realized that the pace I went was a metaphor for how I sometimes feel in life. I felt as though I was being rushed through in order to get to the next activity and I was not fully able to enjoy the experience of walking the labyrinth. . . . I sometimes felt I was following the pace of the crowd rather than my own”

It is always a temptation to follow the pace of the crowd. It is always a temptation to pursue wealth or good looks or fame. It is always a temptation to keep up with the Joneses. But knowing God’s will for our lives, finding that truth, that wisdom, is far more precious, and far more satisfying. It is the only thing that will lead us to true contentment.

Today we celebrate the accomplishments of our seniors, we acknowledge the good work you have done as you’ve made your way from pre-school to this your senior year. We rejoice in the knowledge you have acquired along the way, and we encourage you to continue to learn and grow in your studies. But more importantly, we celebrate the wisdom you have picked up along the way. We celebrate how you are being shaped by life itself, and challenge you to continue to observe all that goes on around them. For in and through the people, the events, the circumstances of your lives, God has much to teach them and us each and every day.

“Listen children to a father’s instruction . . . Get wisdom; get insight.” Learn not just from school, learn from life itself.

And, in your time, might you become wise old men and wise old women.

Amen
John H. Danner

