

where among kalymnians is the greatest degree of wisdom to be observed? i think, almost certainly, among the fishermen.

what are the wise things they say and the wise things they do? only by *living* among them, *watching* them carefully, *listening* attentively can one learn from them gradually.

learn to be a fisherman? learn, slowly to be wise.

to live among wise people is to learn wisdom gradually. can wisdom be learned? can all men learn wisdom? i think almost all men can gain somewhat in wisdom and can gain more in wisdom by living among the wise.

for wisdom is a language, and he would learn something of their language. he might not learn to use it with great ability, but every year for a while he would learn a little, if by nature he was incapable of learning more.

what is the value of wisdom? many values, but perhaps the most obvious, the most nearly tangible: the value of survival.

These are the words of Robert Lax, life-long friend and mentor of Thomas Merton. Lax lived in France and Italy, visited Greece in 1962, and soon after returned to stay, first residing in the Aegean isle of Kalymnos, where the above poem is set, then settling on Patmos. He lived alone as a hermit.

Lax is mentioned more than any other person in Merton's autobiography. "Lax was much wiser than I," Merton wrote, "had a clearer vision, and was corresponding much more truly to the grace of God than I. His was one of the voices through which the insistent Spirit of God was determined to teach me the way I had to travel."

When it comes to how we learn wisdom, Lax's poem is hard to better. Only by living among the wise, watching them carefully, listening attentively can we learn from them gradually, slowly, to be wise. For wisdom is a language learned by living with people who speak it.

This is precisely what Paul is telling the Ephesians: live, not among the foolish but among the wise. For Paul, learning to live wisely means living in a community engaged in doing the sacred acts—worship, prayer, study, service. Even if by nature we are incapable of becoming as wise as Solomon, we can, by making the most of the time, little by little, year by year, grow in wisdom.

The daily religious exercises of the Christian community have the cumulative effect, gradually, over time, of creating in the consciousness a place in which insight can be achieved. Doing the sacred acts produces a combination of understanding and experience conducive to achieving insight.

In an essay entitled "The Transformative Agenda of the Pastoral Office," Walter Brueggemann urges pastors to require regular, disciplined participation in worship as a prerequisite for personal or individual conversation. Why? Because wisdom does not emerge out of the immobilized parishioner or out of the wits of the pastor, but out of the *memory* of the tradition that has long mediated life and health to the community.

This tradition is a current of uninterrupted vitality. What was once real in other times and places becomes real in us today. It is a living spirit marked by freedom and by a certain originality.

Fidelity to tradition does not mean the renunciation of all initiative, but a new initiative that is faithful to a certain spirit of freedom and of vision which demands to be incarnated in a new and unique situation.

You know the old joke: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" Practice! Practice! Practice! Wherever did we get the idea that wisdom is served at the drive through window? Occasional and casual performance of the sacred acts yields insight like occasional and casual practice of the piano secures a debut concert in Carnegie Hall.

Wisdom is not conceived in debauchery. The literal meaning of the Greek word translated "debauchery" is "to be seduced away from one's work." Our work, according to Paul, is to make the most of time doing the sacred acts that make us wise.

In a culture addicted to the instant, says John O'Donohue, there is great amnesia. Amnesia clogs the inner compass and makes the mind homeless. Amnesia makes the sense of absence intense and haunted. We need to retrieve the activity of remembering, for it is here that we are rooted and gathered. Tradition is to the community what memory is to the individual.

The author of Proverbs puts it this way: "Lay aside immaturity, and live, and *walk in the way of insight.*" Walk in the way . . . The early church knew action sensitizes cognition; we know by doing. Doing what is required illuminates and multiplies the possible; it draws the mind into fresh knowing. We do not do what we should only after we are clear about all the facts; we learn wisdom by going the way we must.

David Ford believes wisdom is best learned face to face by apprenticeship to those who have themselves learned it the same way. Perhaps the ultimate privilege is to have wise parents, teachers, and friends, a wise community of the heart. Because wisdom is so much a matter of making the deep connections in the midst of the complexities of life, there is no substitute for seeing how someone does it.

Unless we are moving to Kalymnos to live among the fishermen, slowly, gradually to learn the language of wisdom, we need to be the community that remembers and walks in the current of uninterrupted vitality that is our tradition so that our children may learn wisdom. Wisdom is more than intellectual or academic learning. It is knowledge that goes into the blood stream and affects the whole of life: mind, body, heart and soul.

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