

We had our 30th high school reunion this summer. The Danville High School Class of 1979, where I graduated 77th out of 78 students in 1979. (I've always liked sequential patterns.) I went, not only to see my old friends, but to spy on them, too. I've been secretly conducting a sociological, longitudinal study. Doesn't that sound so much more impressive than saying I've been asking them personal questions that are none of my business? But I've been conducting this study over the past 30 years seeing if there were any correlation between success in high school and happiness and well-being in later life.

I've noticed some very interesting things, and perhaps you have noticed this, too. There were people who did very well in high school—they made good grades and were popular and when they graduated, there were lots of awards and activities listed after their names in the yearbook. Then the years passed, you encountered them again, and life just hadn't clicked for them. They weren't happy, they haven't been able to sustain loving relationships and friendships with other people, they toil in jobs that aren't personally fulfilling. All the promise they showed at a younger age never materialized. When you talk with them, you sense they are nostalgic for those earlier years, because those were the best and happiest times of their lives. That was their mountain-top.

Then there were people who were unremarkable in their early years. Average grades, not very memorable, the kind of people who faded into the woodwork. Then something interesting happened. As they moved out into life, they began to blossom. It didn't happen overnight. But gradually, over the years, their lives took on more dimensions. They are content and happy in life. They are loved by others, and know how to respond with love. They find their work meaningful and inspiring. They have full, rich lives. They blossomed. And while you're very happy for them, you're also a little surprised, because you didn't anticipate that possibility for them.

What happened? What changed? What resource or ability did they not have in their younger years, but eventually came to have, and it changed their lives?

Wisdom.

They developed the ability to discern what was true and what was false, what was helpful and what was not, and what was beneficial and what was detrimental. They not only had the ability to determine the best path—which is insight, they had the strength of will to take that path—which is resolve. This is wisdom—*the ability to know* (insight) and *the capacity to do* (resolve) that which is true, helpful, and beneficial.

You know how most people become wise? By doing the wrong thing and learning from it. Or, if they're lucky, watching others do the wrong thing and learning from their mistakes. But it's most often the case that for us to really learn something and know it deeply and take it into our lives, we have to learn it through our failures and mistakes. Oh, of course, we can also learn through our blessings and good fortune, but for some reason those lessons don't seem to stick.

I have a friend whose wife left him about ten years ago. She'd had an affair, he'd found out about it, and they ended up divorcing. I went to visit him, to sit with him. I said, "I'm so sorry about your marriage."

He said, "I've learned so much about marriage these past few weeks."

I said, "I'll bet you've learned what kind of wife you need to marry in the future?"

He looked at me, then gave this wonderful answer. He said, "No, I've learned what kind of husband I need to be in the future."

Now that's wisdom. From your mistakes, gaining the ability to know, which is insight, and the capacity to do, which is resolve, that which is true, helpful, and beneficial.

Five years passed. My friend remarried and is happy and his life is full and rich and productive. He is loved and knows how to respond with love.

Wise people aren't wise because they don't make mistakes. Wise people are wise because they learn from their mistakes. What are your mistakes teaching you?

In the Bible, the quintessential wise man is Solomon. But I want to lift up someone else. I want to talk about Zacchaeus. Remember his story, in the nineteenth chapter of Luke? His greed, dishonesty, and treachery had alienated him from everyone. Now he is lonely, disgusted with himself, and roundly despised by others. He's dug himself into a hole. Then he meets Jesus and has this insight about himself, he understands the consequences of his mistakes, and he resolves to make amends and start over. And what happened? Jesus looked at him and said, "Today, salvation has come to your house."

Wisdom. What are your mistakes teaching you?

I remember when I was taking an Old Testament class in seminary. We had to read a book called *The Treasures of Darkness* which was a book that compared the book of Deuteronomy and the Babylonian creation myth, the Enuma Elish. Then we had to write a paper about it. So we write the papers and my buddy, Jim Mulholland, is seated beside me and the professor is passing our papers back to us. He stops in front of Jim and says, "Mr. Mulholland, this is a wonderful paper. I've taken the liberty of sending it to a colleague at Harvard."

Naturally, we were all pleased for Jim.

Then the professor stopped in front of me. He said, “Mr. Gulley, Deuteronomy is spelled D-E-U...”

Now there are a lot of things I don’t know. But there is one thing I do know. I now know how to spell the word Deuteronomy and I will never forget it. Geez, I was so embarrassed. But I learned.

What’s our typical response when we’ve made a mistake? We do one of several things. We either deny it. Our pride won’t let us admit to error. When Joan and I were first married, we’d have these arguments over the same issues. One day I asked, “How long are we going to keep arguing about the same stuff?” She said, very sweetly, “Until you are mature enough to admit you might be wrong.” So sometimes our pride won’t let us admit to error. Then we have to grow up and look at ourselves honestly. That’s hard, but until we do it, we’ll never grow.

Another response when we’ve made a mistake is to beat ourselves up over it. No one can be harder on us than we are on ourselves. I’m not a good husband. I’m not a good wife. I’m not a good mother. I’m not a good father. I’m not a good worker. I’m not a good Christian. I’m not a good child. I’m not a good sister. I’m not a good brother. I’m not a good friend. I’m not a good person. I’m not very smart. I’m not very kind. There’s no end to that, and it’s only product is multiplied misery.

No, when you make mistakes, face them squarely, accept responsibility, forgive yourself and forgive others, then stop and ask, “What has this taught me? What do I need to learn from this experience?” If you learn from it, that mistake might be the best thing that ever happened to you.

What have your mistakes taught you?

That is the beginning of wisdom.

The ability to discern what is true and what is false, what is helpful and what is not, and what is beneficial and what is detrimental. The ability to determine the best path—which is insight, and the strength of will to take that path—which is resolve. This is wisdom—*the ability to know* (insight) and *the capacity to do* (resolve) that which is true, helpful, and beneficial.

This is a critical dimension of the spiritual life, and when we learn it, when we develop and cultivate the habit and practice of wisdom, our lives will be blessed, and we will be a blessing to others.

Friends, you are a blessing to me, and I thank you for all you have taught me.