

WISDOM IN RETIREMENT

Mental health at every age includes diet, sleep, exercise, positive thinking, friends and awareness. The ingredients are endless. But what will transport us into wisdom as we age and eventually retire? As Proverbs 3:13-18 poetically reveals, wisdom is more precious than gold. Hopefully, the following thoughts will be “golden nuggets” for you.

Fresh Eyes

A few years ago we visited a beautiful and historic Mexican city, Guanajuato. While there we enjoyed an art museum containing thousands of paintings and sculptures. All of the art was of Don Quixote and his sidekick, Sancho. Only recently, I am a bit embarrassed to admit this, has it dawned on me the incredible wonderfulness of this art experience and of every artistic expression, whether it be music, dance, humor, juggling, singing, etc.

Marcel Proust famously said, “The real voyage of discovery comes not in visiting new lands but in seeing with fresh eyes.” But how do we activate our potential to think new thoughts, grasp another person’s perspective? Most of us have heard the saying, “Experience is the best teacher.” While this is valid, another saying is perhaps equally valid, that “Reflecting upon experience is the best teacher.”

Reflection

Taking the time every day to be still and listen is the pathway to wisdom. Psalm 46 urges, “Be still and know that I am God.” How totally foreign this is to our hurry-up culture. We are so hard working, productive, high achieving in our American culture. Some say we are “human doings” rather than human beings.

This reminds me of an ancient American Indian story about where to find God, peace, understanding, bliss and wisdom. The search led to exploring the four directions as well as the sky and the earth but the goals were not found. Only when they looked inside themselves were the goals of peace, wisdom, bliss and God achieved.

Connecting with our inner self, true self, core self, inner wisdom may come about through many different paths. We may practice mindfulness; sit alone in silence in nature; meditate, contemplate. Like exercise, taking the time to be still and connect with ourselves requires great intention and commitment.

Cultural Bubble

Fish depend upon being in water to obtain life-giving oxygen. We depend upon oxygen to live also. Yet, most of the time we, like fish, are unaware of our dependency. So also is living in our cultural bubble of believing that retirement is ideal and something to be attained at any cost.

Have you noticed that wealthy people and self-employed people seem to avoid retirement? Their work is fulfilling and rewarding so they continue doing it. In the book, The Blue Zones, we learn that native, agrarian Okinawans have no word for retirement. Their lifestyle is full and satisfying with no need or thought of retiring. Whether we retire or not, we must develop a counter-cultural mind that we have the wherewithal to be productive and fulfilled irrespective of our age or life style. Realizing that we possess “Crystallized Intelligence,” the term Arthur Brooks, the CEO of the American Enterprise Institute uses to describe the generational wisdom we hopefully accrue as we age.

Volunteerism

Have you ever met a sad volunteer? The prayer of St. Francis of Assisi says, “It is in giving that we receive.” Erik Erikson theorizes in his seventh developmental stage of generativity, that some of our fulfillment comes from aiding others to do well. We mentor and guide our children, employees, students, prisoners, and the handicapped to agency, that they are the agents of their destiny.

Volunteers are happy people. We feel good about ourselves when we give back to society; we who have been given so much.

People Need People

Remember that iconic Barbara Streisand song? “People who need people are the happiest people I know.” Recent research reveals that even brief, cursory contact with other people has a dramatic, positive therapeutic impact on our frail needy human psyches. Conventional wisdom tells us we need a few trusted friends for emotional intimacy. A greater truth is that every human interaction is mood altering; we are either uplifted or dejected.

What keeps us socially engaged rather than socially isolated? The brief answer is we must like ourselves in order to like and reach out to other people. As we move into “Crystallized Intelligence” or wisdom, we must surround ourselves with love to keep oxygen in our lungs. Friends, whether casual or intimate, are as essential as the air we breathe.

Conclusion

What do you need to do to strengthen your retirement wisdom? Is it to reflect daily so as to see with fresh eyes? Is it to escape our cultural bubble that says older people are past their prime and practically useless? Do we volunteer and surround ourselves with people who love us? Erikson’s eighth and final developmental stage begins at age 65. He labels it “Ego Integrity versus Despair.” As we reflect back on our life, do we perceive our glass of water as half empty or half full? It is never too late to live a meaningful life, to live in wisdom and love.

Dr. Jim David is a practicing psychotherapist in Silver Spring, MD. Visit his website at www.askdrdavidnow.com or email at jimsue63@gmail.com.