



Intelligence versus wisdom, and humility comes out on top

Shoba Narayan

Save this article

Aug 21, 2012

One-page article

Does intelligence have anything to do with happiness? Or is it that more elusive quality - wisdom - that is more beneficial?

A recent research paper, A Route to Well-being: Intelligence vs Wise-Reasoning, suggests that wisdom offers a better route to happiness - the authors call it "well-being" - than standard IQ does.

In the paper, published in the Journal for Experimental Psychology, a team of researchers measure wisdom - "pragmatic reasoning", they call it - through six traits that will not surprise anyone who has lived a long life: considering multiple perspectives, realising that things change, realising that conflicts resolve themselves in unpredictable ways, recognising the limits of our own knowledge and abilities, knowing how to compromise, and knowing how to resolve conflicts.

My own version of this is much more home-grown. My mother is the wisest and happiest person I know. She became this way through decades of spirituality and meditation.

She will tell you that she is not intelligent in the conventional sense. She says, without rancour, that she is a mara-mandai, Tamil for "wooden-headed".

But she is insightful and intuitive, does not worry about little things and lives in the moment. She is the type of person who will stop on a mundane errand to examine a flower hiding behind some bushes in a car park. She giggles a lot. She enjoys nature, birds, animals and the animated movies her grandchildren like to watch.

The problem for me is that the type of wisdom she has cultivated - through hours of meditation - is pretty much impossible for me to achieve. I cannot sit for 1 minutes in stillness, let alone for a few hours. But through her, and through certain incidents in my life, I have a glimpse of what it means to be wise.

My version of wisdom can be summed up in three words: tolerance, acceptance, humility. Each is hard-won and cannot be faked, and each gets honed as one gets older.

With age comes tolerance for multiple points of view and for people's frailties. Once you get past the hubris of youth, once you make your first major mistake you realise that you are frail - not physically, not yet, but mentally and emotionally.

Once you face the series of ethical conundrums that life invariably involves, and make decisions in the grey areas between morality and circumstance; once you make tough calls that are necessary but distasteful, you fall off the moral high ground very quickly. You realise that you are not the all-knowing, self-confident person that you once thought you were.

Wisdom comes from hard knocks, and the curious thing is that most parents do their utmost to protect their children from it. Accepting life's challenges comes from practice. When life throws you enough monkey-wrenches, you learn how to handle them with a certain élan. You learn grace.

Again, the curious thing is that parents will go to enormous lengths to intercept life's curve balls aimed at their children. Unknowingly, parents stunt their children's growth process. The best parenting advice I ever got came from my young brother: "What's your parenting style?" I asked. "Get out of the way," he answered.

Humility can come only from subjugating the ego, and not from false modesty. Humility grows from embracing the average within ourselves.

It has taken me 40 years to accept that I am not and will never be good at maths. I am a truly an average mathematician however much I revere those who are so inclined. Barring a brain transplant, I have no chance of improvement in related areas of human endeavour.

This acceptance was gradual, and I still have to work at the bitter edges. "That's not fair," my 10-year-old daughter says frequently. When she realises the truth in this statement and says it without bitterness, she will be wise. And wisdom, for now at least, seems to come with age.

Shoba Narayan is the author of Return to India and Monsoon Diary

[Back to the top](#)

Previous article

Individualism made
the US great

Next article

Iran's role in Syria's
war makes a quick
conclusion unlikely

[Back to Comment](#)

