

Graduation Address: University of Connecticut

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On Wisdom

Some years ago, I gave a finishing graduate student really rotten advice. One of my graduate students received two job offers, one from a very highly prestigious academic institution and the other from a less prestigious one. The second one was well known, but the first one was near the top of the academic pecking order. She asked me which job offer I thought she should take.

The answer might seem straightforward: Why not take the more prestigious offer? But it was not straightforward. The reason is that the kinds of interests she had seemed better to fit the somewhat less prestigious place than they fit the more prestigious one. In particular, she liked teaching quite a bit, and the second place seemed to emphasize teaching more than the first one.

I was young and foolish at the time—barely out of my 20s—and I foolishly told her to take the more prestigious offer. She did, and it proved to be a mistake. She did not fit in. She did not value what the school valued, and the school did not value what she valued. She valued teaching more than research; the highly prestigious school valued research more than teaching. Several years later, she left, and eventually she ended up at a place that particularly values innovative teaching.

About the same time I needed some advice. I was being considered for tenure at Yale, and it came to my attention that the university was receiving letters that questioned why it would want to give tenure to someone in such a marginal and unprestigious field as intelligence. I sought advice from a senior professor, Wendell Garner, telling him that perhaps I had made a mistake in labeling my work as being about intelligence. Indeed, I could have done essentially the same work but labeled it as being in the field of

“thinking” or of “problem solving” -- fields with more prestige. His advice was that I had come to Yale wanting to make a difference in the field of intelligence. I had made a difference, but now I was afraid it might cost me my job, and I was right. But he maintained that there was only one thing I could do — exactly what I was doing. If this field meant so much to me, then I needed to pursue it, just as I was doing, even if it meant losing my job. I took a risk. It worked — I got tenure. But other risks I have taken have failed. You don’t win them all.

At the time of these events, I realized that Garner had in ample supply something I pretty much lacked. It was not age; it was not experience or knowledge, exactly. It was wisdom. I determined to understand the nature of wisdom, but it is not until recently that I have made any serious inroads.

Wisdom is not just about how much you know or how many skills you have developed. It is about applying your knowledge and skills, over the short and long terms, toward a common good, through the infusion of positive ethical values. Wise people— Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, and others — apply what they know not only to help themselves, but also to help others and the world.

If we look at the world today, we are in crisis. Yet the crisis was created in part by people with high IQs and great educations from prestigious schools. How could such smart people go wrong? The reason is that it is possible to be smart and foolish at the same time.

It is hard to be wise because we are all susceptible to certain cognitive fallacies of thinking that lead us, no matter how smart we are, to think foolishly. What are the fallacies?

The first is egocentrism. Smart people, glorying in their success, may start to act as though the whole world revolves around them. In doing so, they often set themselves up for downfalls, as happened to Dennis Kozlowski, formerly CEO of Tyco, who spent company money extravagantly on himself and his wife as though company resources were to be tapped as his own personal piggybank. More recently, John Thain, then the CEO of Merrill Lynch, gave huge bonuses to top executives at Merrill Lynch as the company was falling apart and about to be acquired. Recently, he has argued he was forced into it.

The second fallacy is a false belief in one's omniscience. Smart people get in trouble when they start to think they "know it all." They may have expertise in one area, but then, come to fancy themselves experts in practically everything. At that point, they become susceptible to remarkable downfalls, because they act as experts in areas where they are not, and can make disastrous mistakes in doing so. Hitler thought he knew all there was to know about different "races." His knowledge was all false, based on pseudo-science bearing no correspondence to reality. The Bay of Pigs invasion during the Kennedy administration was based on false information. And whoever planned the Watergate break-in during the Nixon administration really must have thought he knew a lot. He was wrong.

The third fallacy is a false belief in one's omnipotence. Many smart people find themselves in positions of substantial power. Sometimes they lose sight of the limitations of their power, and start to act as though they are omnipotent. Several U.S. presidents as well as presidents of other countries have had this problem, leading their countries to disasters on the basis of personal whims. Robert Mugabe, the current "president" of Zimbabwe, seems to believe that his power is such that there is no indignity too great to heap upon his own countrymen. His background experience is similar to that of Nelson Mandela, but he has made extremely poor use of his background experience, in contrast to Mandela. And what was Eliot Spitzer, then governor of New York and formerly a career prosecutor who had prosecuted people involved in prostitution, thinking when he made appointments with prostitutes?

The fourth fallacy is a false belief in one's invulnerability. Not only do the individuals think they can do anything; they also believe they can get away with it. They believe that either they are too smart to be found out or, even if found out, they will escape any punishment for misdeeds. The result is the kind of disasters the United States has seen in the recent Enron, Worldcom, and Arthur Andersen debacles. Mugabe, whom I mentioned earlier, has been quoted as saying that only God can remove him from power.

The fifth fallacy is a false sense of ethical disengagement. One comes to believe that ethics apply to others but not to oneself. Those who are ethically disengaged insist on ethical behavior from all people except themselves. A number of television

evangelists, such as Jimmy Swaggert, Jim Bakker, and Ted Haggard preached to tens of thousands of people about the wages of sins, while committing at gross levels the very sins of which they warned others. More recently, we have seen Bernard Madoff sacrifice untold numbers of investors and his own family members to his personal greed. His pyramid scheme was breathtaking in its total absence of ethics. Recently, Sheikh Issa bin Zayed al Nahyan, brother of Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Sheikh Mohammed, apparently had a video made of himself torturing a man whom he thought had cheated him. Which was more unethical—the torture or the creation of the video?

One can scarcely open the newspaper without finding smart, well-educated people who have behaved in ethically-challenged ways. I mentioned Bernard Madoff, but there were also numerous other investment advisors who have come to be called mini-Madoffs because their Ponzi schemes have been similar to Madoff's alleged one. Some of the Wall Street types who helped to create the current economic mess continued to be so greedy that President Obama referred to their behavior as „shameful.“ Even some of the President's proposed political appointees had to withdraw for ethically questionable behavior. And then, of course, there are people like former Governor Blagojevich of Illinois and Kwame Kilpatrick, former mayor of Detroit, who, based on news reports, seemed to have few ethical standards at all. But what is frightening about ethical lapses is not that they happen to the ethically outrageous, but to almost all of us.

“I am very proud of myself,” I told the 17 students in my seminar, *The Nature of Leadership*. I had just returned from a trip, I told them, and felt that the honorarium I was paid for my consulting on ethical leadership was less than I deserved. I felt badly that I had decided to accept such a consulting engagement for so little compensation. I then told the class that I was about to fill out the reimbursement forms when I discovered that I could actually get reimbursed twice. The first reimbursement would come from the organization that had invited me, which required me merely to fill out a form listing my expenses. The second reimbursement would come from my university, which required me to submit the receipts from the trip. I explained to the class that I had worked really hard on the trip consulting about ethical leadership, and so I was pleased that by getting reimbursed twice, I could justify to myself the amount of work I had put into the trip.

I waited for the firestorm. Would the class — which had already studied leadership for several months — rise up in a mass protest against what I had done? Or would only a half-dozen brave souls raise their hands and roundly criticize me for what was obviously patently unethical behavior? I waited, and waited, and waited. Nothing happened. I then decided to move on to the main topic of the day, which, I recall, was ethical leadership! All the time I was speaking about that main topic, I expected some of the students to raise their hands and demand to return to the topic of my double reimbursement. It didn't happen.

Finally, I stopped talking about ethical leadership, and flat-out asked the class whether any of them thought there was something off-the-mark with my desiring to obtain double reimbursement. If so, I told them, why had no one challenged me? I figured that, to a person, they would be embarrassed for not having challenged me. Quite a few of them were embarrassed. Others thought I must have been kidding. Others thought that as I was the professor and a dean to boot, whatever I did I must have had a good reason for. What I did not expect, though — especially after having taught them for several months about ethical leadership — was that some of the students would commend me on my clever idea and argue that, if I could get away with it, I was entitled to receive the money — more power to me!

This experience reminded me of how hard it is to translate theories of ethics, and even case studies, into one's own practice. The students had read about ethics in leadership, heard about ethics in leadership from a variety of real-world leaders, discussed ethics in leadership, and then apparently totally failed to recognize unethical behavior when it stared them in the face. Moreover, these were students who by conventional definitions would be classified as gifted. (Full disclosure: I did not really seek double reimbursement!) Why is it so hard to translate theory into practice, even after one has studied ethical leadership for several months? Because we may know what is ethical, but we sacrifice wise and ethical action to personal self-interest, often making excuses for ourselves while we are doing it.

Finally, to be wise, you must be true to yourself. Let me end with an example.

When I was a first-year assistant professor, the second colloquium I was invited to give was at a large testing organization that will go unnamed. I was delighted that the

company was apparently interested in adopting my ideas about intelligence, even though I was only 25 years of age. My career seemed to be off to a spectacular start. I took the train to the organization's headquarters and gave the talk I had been invited to give. To my astonishment, the talk was an abject failure. It was clear that most of the audience hated the talk I gave and perhaps me as well. I was greatly chagrined. I went from expecting a dazzling career to wondering whether I would have a career at all.

In retrospect, I wonder what I actually expected. Did I think that people who were, say, 65, were going to come up to me and tell me how they had wasted their lives doing conventional testing and now were delighted that I, at 25, had shown them the light. This is an organization that makes gazillions of dollars in revenue from conventional tests and it is not likely that they will be eager to question the basis for their own revenue. I realized then that standing up for what you believe in is hard, especially when others in positions of power disagree. But if you look at the wisest people in our country's history — George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and, in my view, Barack Obama — that is exactly what they have done. And it something I hope you will do too!

Good luck to you all, and have wonderful lives! If I ever can be of assistance to any of you, my name again is Bob Sternberg, and just contact me at Tufts. I'm happy to help in any way I can.