

## We-ness and the cultivation of relational wisdom

*We are not provided with wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness which no one else can take for us, an effort which no one can spare us.*

Marcel Proust

As the quote above suggests, wisdom is typically portrayed as a solitary endeavor. Yet, on an almost daily basis, we read evidence of the importance of relationships for our physical and mental health. In the midst of the resurgence of interest in this pinnacle of human development, my colleagues and I have been pursuing wisdom as a relational phenomenon.

We have been influenced by the field of psychology's (both research and clinical) shift from pathology driven paradigms to strength based approaches. Qualities such as honesty, courage, generosity, forgiveness, justice and other character strengths not only have a growing research base but the sub specialty of positive psychology has developed to advance the understanding of these concepts (Csikszentmihalyi & Seligman, 2000). As empirical work continues to broaden our conceptualization of the wisdom domain (Staudinger, 2000; Meeks & Jeste, 2009), the relational dimension has received considerably less attention. Slowly, a rich literature is beginning to evolve that is dedicated to uncovering growth-promoting, affirming processes as well as to identify resilient qualities that may be exclusive to the couple relationship (Skerrett & Fergus, In Press).

Given the high consensus among people in western and eastern societies on the definition of wisdom as the perfect integration of mind and character for the greatest good, we wondered how that might apply to relationships. Certainly the pragmatic dimensions emphasized by Aristotle such as risk-taking, determining a course of action among many options, holding the tension within contradiction and managing ambiguity is the everyday business of couple interaction. Partnerships regularly confront differences of opinion, mismatches in everything from biorhythms to sexual desire and must navigate challenges like one partner growing out of love, a newly sober partner trying to connect to a distant, angry spouse. Decisions may be made and new behaviors executed but wisdom is far from a guaranteed outcome. Situating the achievement of wisdom within the domain of personal and relational growth helps us frame wisdom as an optional task of human development. The complexity reflected in the notion of relational wisdom can be appreciated when we remember that personal growth and wisdom in one partner may result in the end of the relationship. How then, can we think about a relational wisdom?

Over the past decade, one relational process has emerged with greater frequency and clarity as critical to positive couple functioning and resilience. Various referred to as 'communal', collaborative' or 'we' coping, this process has to do with a couple's ability to approach life's challenges from a collective orientation, one that draws upon and goes beyond the couple's unique individual and shared resources (Skerrett & Fergus, In Press). Most definitions of wisdom include this self-transcendent quality and the

capacity to transcend personal interest to relational interest sets the stage for the development of relational wisdom.

“We-ness’ refers to the sense of mutual identity couples describe as the lived experience of their relationship and is accumulated over many events. It is the kind of thinking that reflects receptivity and the integration of the other’s perspective in one’s own and has been found to have defining as well as adaptive qualities throughout a couple’s relationship (Skerrett, 2004; 2013). There is considerable work being done around the relationship of ‘we-talk- to broad areas of communal coping and couple adjustment to illness and disability (Connor, Robinson & Wieling, 2008; Skerrett & Fergus, In Press) as well as associations to relationship satisfaction in distressed couples (Williams-Baucom, Atkins, Sevier, Eldridge, & Christensen, 2010). Given the challenges of coping with daily life as an individual, learning to deal with a stressor while thinking and acting in the best interests of the relationship is even more formidable. We-ness thus requires a fundamental shift in consciousness and underlies much of a couple’s ability to generate the positive emotion that is necessary to de-escalate conflict and sustain commitment. Certainly, this is the soil in which to cultivate relational wisdom and story-telling is a particularly helpful guide to understanding the most growth promoting ingredients. A narrative perspective emphasizes the role of stories as moral-driven meaning shapers. Not all stories are created equal and for a particular story to really work, it has to have a certain moral quality, a “life lesson” of sorts. This makes the story an ideal vehicle to examine the transmission of values and wisdom over time.

Randall (2013) posed that it is narrative reflection that is most linked to the development of wisdom. To say it another way, wisdom represents the deepened knowledge of the stories of our lives. The ironic nature of one’s inner world and particularly the relational space between, exposes many incongruities between what is said and understood or what is expected and what actually occurs. This irony is embedded within many, of not most of couples’ circular arguments and attempts to prove the ‘truth’ of one point of view vs. another. Such ironies are part of the human condition and precisely what adds depth to a story.

The overarching question of the ways in which individual stories of wants and needs translate into a joint story that might enhance resilience and cultivate wisdom has guided a series of studies on story-telling in nonclinical (Skerrett, 2010) and clinical committed partners (Singer & Skerrett, 2014). By examining partner stories we have learned that what we-oriented memories and relationship themes have in common are certain features that allow them to highlight a sense of connection for a couple. The features are: a conscious interpretation of life experiences that describes how one got from point A to point B, an internal coherence, an overall theme of redemption or recasting negative events into positive meaning and a lesson about the value of the couple’s relationship. Effective we-stories combine these features into compelling and persuasive narratives that are memorable, maintain a story-telling vitality and offer a clear lesson about the value of mutuality (Singer & Skerrett, 2014).