4 Strategies for Teaching Wisdom Today

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In October of 1979, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Barbara Tuchman delivered a lecture at West Point in which she decried the "persistence of unwisdom" among politicians across the ages. Reflecting on how American presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon had embroiled the United States more deeply in the Vietnam War, Tuchman bemoaned a perennial "wooden-headedness" -- a tendency for politicians to act wishfully, while not allowing themselves to be "confused by facts."

Tuchman spoke of geopolitical reason as overwhelmed by "ambition, greed, fear, face-saving, the instinct to dominate, the needs of the ego, the whole bundle of personal vanities and anxieties." Evoking an explicitly male obsession with potency, she concluded that, in government, "men seek power over others -- only to lose it over themselves."

I dare say that even Tuchman could not have foreseen the depths of unwisdom displayed daily by our 45th U.S. president.

Nothing would be easier than to survey the various manifestations of Donald J. Trump's "unwisdom" to show that his style of government represents an uncanny apotheosis of the trends that Tuchman decried in the waning years of the Carter administration. The recent proliferation of blank gift books with titles like *The Wisdom of Donald Trump: Words for All Americans* and *The Wit and Wisdom of Donald Trump* suggests that many Americans would concur with the comment of New Orleans Saints coach Sean Payton, speaking of Trump's Twitter battle with the National Football League: "I think we need a little more wisdom in that office."

Yet focusing on President Trump's particular brand of unwisdom -- an obsessive temptation, to be sure -- tends to let us *all* off the hook. Tuchman recognized the collective's role in sustaining unwisdom when she remarked in the concluding sentence of her address, "Perhaps, rather than educating officials, we should concentrate on educating the electorate -- that is, ourselves -- to look for, to recognize and to reward character in our representatives, and to reject the ersatz."

We have many reasons to feel that, in 2018, Tuchman's injunction to educate for wisdom is a heavy lift. We live in a time when technological innovation and a rampant ideology of self seem clearly to conspire against wisdom's acquisition. A news cycle driven by the frenetic accounting of momentary winners and losers; cable outlets addicted to the staging of partisan conflict; the continued decline of ostensibly objective media venues; a social media space marked by the clamor for markers of attention (likes, retweets); the increasing replacement of text-based analysis with more emotionally resonant memes; a rampant presentism -- all of these trends undermine development of the mature, nuanced, historically informed and empathic reflection on which wisdom depends. Recent revelations around Cambridge

Analytica's misuse of Facebook data in the run-up to the 2016 election confirm Stephan S. Hall's argument that our political sphere has become disturbingly adept at speaking to the emotional brain, so as to "short-circuit (*neurologically*!) political thoughtfulness." Not surprisingly, a recent study in *Science* reports that fake news spreads through Twitter "farther, faster, deeper and more broadly" than truth.

Compounding these developments is our tendency as contemporary Americans to double down on what author and commentator David Brooks has dubbed the "moral ecology" of "the Big Me" -- an ideology of individual achievement that fails to recognize that we are fundamentally social beings who only fully realize our aspirations in society. Our increasingly curated online lives not only make us anxious about not measuring up; they tend to erase the life struggles so essential to the acquisition of wisdom.

In the face of such headwinds, I see our task as educators as twofold: to lay the groundwork for wisdom by consciously aligning our pedagogy with its most essential attributes and to use examples of great wisdom -- past and, most especially, present -- to waken in our students a hunger for it.

It has, of course, long been argued that wisdom cannot be taught. In the essay "Of Pedantry," Montaigne famously writes, "For though we could become learned by another man's learning, we can never be wise except by our own wisdom." Wisdom is the fruit of long experience, the argument goes, and cannot be transmitted in the way knowledge can -- in part because, as my late colleague University of Southern California professor of philosophy Dallas Willard once noted, "exhortation is not the only, nor the most effective, way of teaching."

That is not to say, however, that we cannot teach *for* wisdom. Psychologist Robert Sternberg, arguably the strongest recent proponent of that approach, rightly suggests that, although we cannot teach "particular courses of action that would be considered wise regardless of circumstance," we can and must "provide the scaffolding for the development of wisdom and case studies to help students develop wisdom." I would argue that four such strategies are especially fitting today.

First, at a time when our media environment and our practices of secondary education tend to reward those who stake out a position and defend it at all costs, it is vital that we as educators teach our students to acknowledge and appreciate complexity, in both its cognitive *and* ethical forms. That means focusing our pedagogy not only on the quarrel between valid interpretative approaches to a given question or problem but also on the moral dilemmas that arise (as Brooks puts it) "when two legitimate moral values clash." At American University, we recently instituted a mandatory multitopic seminar for all incoming undergraduates, entitled Complex Problems, aimed at instilling just such an appreciation.

Second, we must consistently help our students to see how the actions and values of individuals -- whether historic, contemporary or fictional -- have been shaped by their particular social, cultural, economic and/or religious contexts. Studying abroad in a culture radically different from one's own remains the single best way to solidify this awareness, consistent with

Mark Twain's insight that travel is "fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness … Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." But study abroad is only conducive to such cross-cultural sensitivity if students have been prepared to develop it through prior experience and course work. (Joseph E. Aoun, president of Northeastern University, has recently suggested that fostering student engagement with diverse cultures is doubly valuable in the age of artificial intelligence insofar as cultural context is "not easily appreciated by even the most intelligent of machines.")

Aristotle's dictum that "It is impossible to be practically wise without being good" points to a third way to teach for wisdom: by fostering in our students an empathic care for the other and a deep-seated sense of social justice. Many academic disciplines actively work to nurture these; allow me to take an example from mine. Thinking of the ways in which novels effectively put the reader into the head of their characters, and buttressed by a well-known, if controversial, 2013 study contending that the act of reading of literary fiction boosts empathy and emotional intelligence, Gary Saul Morson, professor of the arts and humanities at Northwestern University, and Morton Schapiro, president of Northwestern, have argued that, "endlessly repeated, this experience of another person from within teaches us empathy by making it a habit." One need not go back to the great novels of the 19th-century psychological realists -- Tolstoy, Eliot, Austen, et al. -- to find novels that do this. Imbolo Mbue's 2016 debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, is just one of several recent novels of immigrant life in America that brilliantly -- and, yes, wisely -- evoke a deep sense of readerly empathy across significant cultural divides.

Finally, and in many ways most critically, wisdom implies cognitive humility. "I am wiser than he is to this small extent," Socrates famously remarks in Plato's *Apology*, "that I do not think that I know what I do not know." What Brooks calls "epistemological modesty" is not something that comes naturally to the talented 18-year-olds who populate our classes or that we ourselves once were. And, of course, nothing is more counterproductive or hostile to learning as a process of mutual discovery than simply insisting upon our students' ignorance. In all of its manifestations, wisdom is not an end state so much as a process -- not a body of knowledge but an approach to its acquisition; not a fixed corpus of moral and ethical answers but a deep-seated (and ever-renewed) engagement in ethical questioning.

Students -- and indeed we as faculty members -- have much to learn from the now extensive body of philosophical and psychological literature on wisdom. But the most essential step that we as professors can take in teaching for wisdom is to model cognitive humility, to allow all that we don't yet know and may never know to shine through our disciplinary expertise, to let our continued curiosity about the world we live in trigger our students' enthusiasm.

As hardheaded academics, we tend to be suspicious of the seemingly mushy, New Agey concept of wisdom. But in a political and social age that devalues cognitive and moral nuance, ignores the determinative force of cultural difference, and leaves both empathy and cognitive humility in short supply, we have no choice but to consistently, and self-consciously, teach for wisdom.