

Director's Corner

Seeking Wisdom in COVID-19 Times

by Adina Kalet, MD, MPH

We are weary. The COVID -19 pandemic drags on and, while Spring is in the air and an end to our social isolation seems in sight, many of us feel traumatized. I do not need to review our losses except to say there have been many, we will be feeling them for a while, and some people will be marked for life. There will be long-term negative consequences. We can only hope there might also be growth.

Philosophers and psychologists agree that the human capacity to find steadiness or growth in the face of challenge is often the path to wisdom, or as a colleague of mine used to regularly opine during our nights on call, *"just another f--king growth experience."*

In the first six months of the pandemic, Tyler VanderWeele, PhD, epidemiologist, biostatistician, and director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, studied a national sample of adults. Remarkably, he demonstrated that the domains of Meaning and Purpose and Character and Virtue held steady in the face of this adversity! Not surprisingly, other domains, including Happiness and Life Satisfaction, Mental and Physical Health, Close Social Relationships, and Financial and Material Stability, declined. It tells us that, while we have all been traumatized over the past year and have experienced the impact, most of us are still capable of "post traumatic growth."

Wisdom practices: "*What COVID-19 has taught me*"

I have a friend who keeps a running list of "What COVID-19 has taught me." The list reminds her daily of her post traumatic growth and, although, much of it is "tongue in cheek" (e.g., fourth grade math, what a spike protein is), the list

continues to expand. Establishing habits centered around gratitude is a characteristic of a wise person.

This past week, I (virtually) attended a conference sponsored by the Wake Forrest University Program for Leadership and Character and cosponsored by the Oxford Character Project entitled "Character and the Professions." Thought leaders from religion, business, engineering and technology, public life, law and, of course, medicine, gave talks and engaged in panel discussions around the "crisis of character in leadership." In olden pre-pandemic times, all the attendees would have traveled to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, checked into hotels, hobnobbed with each other wearing plastic badges on lanyards, sat together in large auditoriums, and watched the inspiring speakers (Colin Powell and Madeleine Albright!) on Jumbotrons. Instead, the 2300 participants "Zoomed" in from the comfort of their own homes in thirty-seven countries, sat in their own time zones and, probably, participated in pajamas; I did dress up and put on lipstick – but no high heels – for the one session where I was on-camera, just for old time's sake.

The conference experience reminded me that there have been so many losses in this virtual world. We cannot catch up with old friends and make unanticipated, new connections. We miss the chance to travel, experience new cultures, and have long conversations over shared meals.

Yet, the tradeoffs *are* worth celebrating. As was the Kern Institute's experience with our large events this past year, this past week's conference touched a much larger, more geographically diverse audience and, of course, everyone saved a tremendous amount of time, money, and jet fuel. We still had meaningful conversations about important ideas. This is on *my* "What COVID-19 has taught me" gratitude list. I learned a great deal.

Practical Wisdom and Virtuous Cycles: How do we help learners turn obstacles into growth?

At the Kern Institute, we propose that attaining Practical Wisdom is a central goal of medical education. Practical Wisdom, or *phronesis* in Greek, is the

ability to *"do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons."* Sounds good, right? But how exactly do we educate toward wisdom?

In her talk at the conference, Margaret Plews-Ogan, MD Chief of the Division of General Medicine, Geriatrics, and Palliative Medicine at University of Virginia School of Medicine pointed out that *we are in most need of wisdom when things are most uncertain and ambiguous*. As any physician recognizes, the daily practice of our profession provides endless wisdom learning opportunities.

But what is wisdom, really? (You might want to read this paragraph twice…) It has been conceptualized as *a set of reflective, cognitive, and affective capacities which can be learned and honed - usually most effectively through facing adversity - and engaging in a particular kind of reflection intentionally aimed at meaning-making and increasing tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, compassion, and humility.*

What is key here? It is that this reflection goes *beyond* understanding and managing one's own emotional states, because a wise person focuses on the greater good, not simply one's own.

If we longitudinally integrate opportunities for such reflection in our education, we turn challenges into opportunities to promote both individual well-being and wisdom. To be a "virtuous cycle" that leads to growth rather than despair, obstacles must be linked with a teacher-guided acceptance, reflection, meaning-making, and integration in order to create a new sense of self or identity formation. The cycle strengthens the character of individuals and transforms our learning contexts and environments into places where we can explicitly and intentionally foster wisdom.

Opportunities and challenges to the development of Practical Wisdom

COVID-19 aside (a big aside!), medical training and practice provide opportunities for - but does not guarantee - the development of Practical Wisdom. There is the possibility of both Post Traumatic Growth (the positive

impacts gained by struggling with highly stressful, traumatic life events) alongside Post Traumatic Stress (those noxious, persistent, and disturbing psychological impacts of trauma). There is the possibility of the trainee entering a Virtuous Cycle (where each obstacle provides a growth opportunity) or a Vicious Cycle (that carries the trainee further and further down).

As educators, how do we live and model this? We must practice being open to traumatic experiences and incline ourselves towards gratitude and forgiveness. These traits will predispose us to experience wisdom formation in the midst of trauma. Will we include more compassion and connectedness as we discover new paths? Will we develop a greater appreciation for life and ask deeper philosophical questions? (Taku)

As educators, we must ensure our trainees experience growth even as they have experienced disquiet. Attentive mentors working within cultures of character and caring can be changemakers. As we approach the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel let's seek to be wiser, for our patients, our students, our families and ourselves.

For further reading:

VanderWeele, T.J., Fulks, J., Plake, J.F., and Lee, M.T. (2021). National well-being measures before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in online samples. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 36:248-250.

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Westrate N.M, Gluck J, (2017) Hard Earned Wisdom: exploratory processing of difficult life experience is positively associated with wisdom. *Developmental Psychology* 53: 800-814

Taku, K., Tedeschi, R. G., Shakespeare-Finch, J., Krosch, D., David, G., Kehl, D., ... & Calhoun, L. G. (2021). Posttraumatic growth (PTG) and posttraumatic depreciation (PTD) across ten countries: Global validation of the PTG-PTD theoretical model. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *169*, 110222.

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