

University of North Carolina

Institute on **A**ging

2

The Wisdom of Age -
An Historian's Perspective

W. Andrew Achenbaum, Ph.D.
Institute of Gerontology
University of Michigan

April 3, 1997

DISTINGUISHED LECTURE SERIES

In August 1996, the North Carolina General Assembly approved funding for the creation of an Institute on Aging. The new institute was to be placed under the general umbrella of the University of North Carolina System and be based on the campus in Chapel Hill, with an explicit mandate to extend its reach throughout the state. Subsequently, the decision was made to locate the Institute on Aging within the Division of Health Affairs, along with a number of problem-focused centers and institutes having a pan-university responsibility for building interdisciplinary programs. In addition, a Statewide Aging Advisory Committee was formed, through which the institute could bring into its overall program the views and perspectives, as well as the active participation, of colleagues in the aging field from our sister institutions of the UNC System, as well as the Cooperative Extension Service, the Community College System, and faculty with aging interests in the private colleges and universities of the state.

The Institute on Aging will have separate divisions for public service, educational programs, and research. Among the disciplines of faculty participating in the new institute are the social sciences, clinical medicine, epidemiology, the biology of aging, education, law and social work.

One of the first initiatives of the Institute is the sponsorship of a distinguished lecture series on aging issues. The presentations of our distinguished lecturers will be printed and distributed widely. We invite our colleagues and the general public with an interest in the field of aging to join us for these periodic lectures sponsored by the Institute on Aging.

for more information contact:
UNC Institute on Aging
Campus Box #1030
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-1030
Telephone: 919/966-9444

The Wisdom of Age - An Historian's Perspective

W. Andrew Achenbaum, Ph.D.
Institute of Gerontology
University of Michigan

April 3, 1997

Multidisciplinary centers have important but anomalous roles at research universities such as the University of Michigan and the University of North Carolina. For more than a quarter of a century, chief academic officers at major research centers have hoped that interdisciplinary activities would counterbalance the deadening effects of specialization. We have 51 institutes on the Ann Arbor campus, which are expected to generate innovations at the margins, beyond the learning that takes place in classrooms. As you develop this new Institute on Aging in Chapel Hill, you have to confront a serious challenge: Can multidisciplinary institutes be organized and maintained so that they foster greater intellectual risk-taking than takes place within departmental settings?

Distinctive intellectual risk-taking in a multidisciplinary center occurs when investigators pursue big research questions for which answers are not remotely known in advance. Most questions in the social and natural sciences as well as the humanities are framed to produce publishable results. Even if an article is vacuous, it gets into print if its structure and tone generally conform to prevailing disciplinary conventions. They satisfy experts who expect certain answers on the basis of having heard the generic question before. At my center, however, some questions end up being interesting—Why are there gender differences in disability patterns over time? Are there any ubiquitous “underlying mechanisms” that can be measured at the cellular level across organisms?—precisely because they have been phrased in a manner intentionally so vague as to raise the substantial possibility of generating no positive findings at all. Subsequent research steps, to be pursued fruitfully, require an environment in which serious scholars from a variety of orientations can refine old questions and newcomers raise their own.

Accordingly, centers and institutes should be reserved for researchers asking questions that the pursuit of which sometimes proves to be a waste of time. This is not a signal trait of multidisciplinary science: traditional scholarship does not always pan out. But “normal” disciplinary science is puzzle-solving within an accepted paradigm. In contrast, interdisciplinary research generally relies on the goodwill and exchange of ideas and researchers trained in different ways, yet who share an interest in a similar problem. Lots of disciplines have specialists interested in aspects of gerontology, but only institutes like those in Ann Arbor and Chapel Hill put “age” and “aging” at the center of every inquiry. The problems to be explored in UNC’s Institute on Aging should sit in departments far less comfortably than in the research-driven multidisciplinary center you hope to establish. Whether this enterprise thrives depends on the ratio of successes to failures as measured in the

Provost's office. Successes will open vast new vistas of normal research, but take heart: failures sometimes enhance the value of contemplating the next batch of provisional questions.

My own current research has been stimulated and refined by day-to-day interactions with biochemists, engineers, geriatricians, systems analysts, statisticians, and psychologists. I am studying how people grow wiser with advancing years. The topic is "hot"—wisdom is a big seller, and not just in New Age bookstores. Last year, Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul* outsold Thomas More's *Utopia*. The dynamics of wisdom is a multidisciplinary "problem" that is worthy of sustained investigation. Yet we know little about how to define wisdom. There is no consensus as to its form or variations.

So let us begin by acknowledging that there are many pathways to wisdom. Occasionally people seek to grow wiser when they are moved to connect more deeply with a source of inspiration within them. They thirst for spiritual growth, which they feel will give them true intimacy. Others want the consolations of wisdom to deal with fears and losses, including the illness, or death of a loved one. Tragedies force them to reconsider where they thought they were heading. There are exceptions, of course. We all know grandmothers, a kid in the neighborhood, or someone like Forrest Gump whom we might (justifiably or misguidedly) call "wise." Sometimes "wisdom" is an attribute to people who do not necessarily desire nor think they possess it. In general, however, I contend that the pursuit of wisdom is intentional. It affords, even facilitates, greater integration of thoughts, feelings and actions.

Like other paths to maturity, the search for wisdom can be daunting—full of sorrow, pain, and sacrifice. Awakening to the possibilities of greater enlightenment does not guarantee happiness. Neither self-reflexivity nor integrity is sufficient to ward off the vicissitudes of life. Not everybody wants to become wise (nor manages to do so) with age. Rather than measuring successful outcomes, the focus here is on those who seek wisdom, however defined. How do such men and women characterize the pursuit? When in the search are awakenings likely to happen? Do interpretations of the experience differ substantively over the life course?

Let us make a cursory review of the psychological literature. Behavioral scientists for some time have been at the forefront of research in this domain. I highlight certain, divergent orientations to illustrate the variety of approaches in a single discipline. I begin with the work of Carl Jung, one of the first to subject "wisdom" to scientific analysis.

In Jung's theory, the psychological balancing of masculine and feminine aspects was fundamental to his concepts of individuation and wisdom. According to Jung, wisdom becomes possible with the integration of anima (feminine aspect of males) and animus (masculine aspect of females). Varied exploration of "feminine" and "masculine" experiences and their meaning for both sexes allowed for integration and variegation. Archetypes in a person's consciousness were said to expand the personality, opening access to inner sources of wisdom through other archetypal images. Some images represented symbols of wholeness. Other images were embod-

ied in personifications of the “Wise Old Man” or the “Great Earth Mother.” These archetypal figures were homologous insofar as they connoted deep knowledge and love. Paradoxically, such beneficent qualities were understood to exist dualistically with a person’s capacities for ignorance and destruction. The search for wisdom is not, in other words, an exercise in positivism. The Jungian dualism took account of the heterogeneity of experiences over the life course, without stipulating an ordered sequence. Jung’s model, however, has been criticized for andocentric theorizing. Besides depicting women in negative ways at times, Jung confused female psychology with the projected feminine (anima) characteristics of men. His use of gender archetypes has also been viewed suspiciously.

And herein lies the flaw in this (and other scholars’) dualistic models. To the extent that Jung’s archetypal aspects are construed as inherent and universal, they dichotomize the mind into two spheres: the feminine-in-Eros-cum-emotionality and the masculine-cum-Logos-and-rationality. While his perspectives on adult development require us to acknowledge differences between how men and women age, Jung’s views of the masculine and feminine often reinforced traditional, even essentialist, gender stereotypes. One real benefit of Jung’s work, nonetheless, has been a greater valuing of largely repressed feminine modalities in individuals and cultures. For instance, the notion that older people reveal greater androgyny than younger ones has been documented in David Gutmann’s *Powers Reclaimed* (Basic Books, 1987).

A second paradigm of wisdom, one that I was taught as an undergraduate, is a “stage” model of human development. Erik Erikson was 48 when he unveiled an 8-stage model of the life cycle. The analyst asserted that no single source or experience inspired the model. “An expert,” Erikson declared at the time, “in addition to some verifiable fact, consistent theory or technical skill must have some meaningful insight.” Erikson based his claim on expertise on his mastery of many ways of seeing. An artist who had studied with both Sigmund and Anna Freud, he modified the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis in the course of acquiring a “knack” for child analysis. Erikson in the 1930s interacted with distinguished social and behavioral scientists at Harvard, Yale and Berkeley: he observed Sioux and Yurok Indian children at play.

At a Veteran’s Rehabilitation Clinic during World War II, Erikson worked with emotionally disturbed men having difficulties readjusting to civilian life. Becoming interested in “loss of identity” in youth, he tried to bolster patients’ sense of self by applying techniques used with psychoneurotic teenagers, adolescent psychotics, and juvenile delinquents.

Such clinical activities prompted Erikson to hypothesize that a healthy adolescent “knows where he is going” because both his past and his future give direction. In adulthood and old age, humans face a different set of challenges. In the end, according to Erikson, elders are well on the road to wisdom or have collapsed into despair. Over time, Erikson refined his model. His attention to generational cycles, societal context, and historical time increasingly set him apart from other “classical” analysts. The analyst did not so much reject Freudian theory as he reframed its orientation. (We shall return to Erikson’s search for wisdom at the end of this paper).

The gold standard of behavioral analyses of wisdom is presently set by Paul Baltes and his colleagues in Germany. The Berlin researchers approach wisdom as a

form of “advanced cognitive functioning” and “intellectual growth.” They define wisdom as “an expert knowledge system in the fundamental pragmatics of life permitting exceptional insight, judgment, and advice involving complex and uncertain matters of the human condition.” A person is only considered to be wise if all of the following five criteria are present.

1. *Rich factual knowledge*: general and specific knowledge about the conditions and its variations
2. *Rich procedural knowledge*: general and specific knowledge about strategies of judgment and advice concerning matters of life
3. *Life span contextualism*: knowledge about the contexts of life and their temporal (developmental) relationships
4. *Relativism*: knowledge about difference in values, goals, and priorities
5. *Uncertainty*: knowledge about the relative indeterminacy and unpredictability of life and ways to manage

While Baltes’s findings have generated new interest in “wisdom,” they are not without critics. Monika Ardelt, for instance, argues that Baltes’s approach to measurement is quite problematic. Wisdom-related knowledge, postulates the Baltes group, is always personal, applied, and concrete. Only those individuals should be considered wise who can apply their knowledge in the “fundamental pragmatics of life” to themselves. According to Ardelt, this definition may ignore certain other realities. For instance, there are many people who have obtained theoretical (intellectual) knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life through books and lectures. But do they ever use this knowledge in their daily professional life? Some learned academics typify the “helpless helper” syndrome, fueling images of risible absent-minded professors. Only persons who follow their own sage advice should be considered as truly wise. Furthermore, Baltes focuses primarily on descriptive rather than interpretative knowledge. But to be wise does not simply refer to a “state of knowledge.” As Eric Fromm noted, growing wiser is a process, not essentially a state of being. Wisdom is not necessarily what a person says but is expressed through an individual’s personality characteristics which manifest themselves in his or her conduct and behavior. A wise statement alone is not an indication of wisdom. Philosopher John Kekes observes:

A fool can learn to say all the things a wise man says, and to say them on the same occasions. The difference between them is that the wise man is promoted to say what he does, because he recognizes the significance of human limitations and possibilities, because he is guided in his actions by their significance, and because he is able to exercise good judgment in hard cases, while the fool is mouthing clichés.

Finally, Gisela Labouvie-Vief moves us beyond Baltes’s pragmatics by challenging us to eschew dualistic constructs. She argues that the historical evolution of wisdom in Western thought presages an integration of dualistic modes of thinking. In defining wisdom as an integration of organic, subjective modes of thought (i.e., “mythos”) with rationalistic, objective modes of thought (i.e., “logos”), Labouvie-Vief rejects the notion that wisdom is commensurate with the formally complex thought or cognitive expertise typically associated with “men of science” or other

masculine modes of expertise. Although grounded in intellectual operations, wisdom entails a complementary knowledge based in symbolic, metaphoric, and bodily awareness: “While logos has insisted on the separation of such realms as reason and faith, thinking versus feeling, outer versus inner, or mind versus body, wisdom maintains that these two realms constitute but complementary and interacting poles of thought.” Labouvie-Weif’s emphasis on myth and aspects of human experiences that transcend scientific categories permits us to shift from psychology to theology.

Let us move now to another discipline that has enriched our sense of what it means to become wiser as individuals grow older. Religious scholars focus on wisdom. There are many studies of Wisdom found in commentaries on Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Psalms. Feminist scholars have enriched our understanding of sex and gender in the Bible by rediscovering the central place of Sophia in Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament. Other books, not usually associated with Wisdom literature, merit scrutiny.

The Book of Genesis, for example, contrasts two archetypal couples who, in the prime of their lives, yearned for a deeper sense of what it means to strive to be fully human. God let Adam and Eve name “every living creature” in Paradise. Responsible for nurturing and maintaining the garden, the couple could do everything except eat the fruit of one tree, the Tree of Knowledge. Eve blamed the serpent, but it was she who figured that eating the forbidden fruit was a means of attaining wisdom (Gen. 3:6). Sure enough, as soon as they had taken a bite, Adam and Eve perceived things differently. They felt shame and experienced fears so great that the pair hid when the Lord came in their presence. Questioned about his behavior, Adam admitted that “I was afraid because I was naked” (Gen. 3:10). Despite their excuses, God knew that if Adam and Eve were brash enough to “become one of us” by reaching for the apples, they also might be tempted to take from “the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Gen. 3:22). So the pair were expelled from Paradise. Adam and Eve’s search for wisdom began and apparently ended unhappily with that awakening in the Garden. Not every quest ends so decisively or dramatically.

Abram was seventy-five when the Lord told him to “go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you.” God promised that “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:1-2). Abram took God at this word: “So Abram went,” we are told two verses later, with no clue as to what Abram thought or how he felt about the call.

Faith and fear continually awakened Abraham in ripening maturity to new depths of understanding during his search for wisdom. The Binding of Isaac (or Akedah), among other episodes, reveals supreme personal integrity in a relationship with God. It is also possible that Isaac’s “look of terror, fear, shock, betrayal, or was it perhaps a look of trust and faith” awakened in Abraham the conviction that his fundamental belief in God made him free to serve the Lord by acting responsibly in honoring the integrity and potential of other human beings. Both Abraham and Isaac had passed the test of faithfulness—the Lord sent an angel to stay Abraham’s

hand. A ram was found and duly sacrificed, the place of the offering henceforth was called “The Lord will provide” (Gen. 22:14). Later, the angel of the Lord assured Abraham that his offspring would be numerous and blessed “because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:18). And so it goes: the Bible proves to be a rich source for those seeking to understand wisdom.

My own initial work in wisdom began not in reading exegetes of Genesis but by studying the Book of Job. I must acknowledge that the immersion occurred unexpectedly, quite serendipitously. I started studying “wisdom” because a post-doctoral student in psycho-gerontology, who was investigating the subject, needed a mentor. I was an unlikely but available choice. Since I knew nothing about psychometrics (her specialty), I suggested that we hammer out a definition of “wisdom” by reading Job as a piece of fiction full of imagery. Somewhat reluctantly, Lucinda Orwell agreed. Our discussion and fights became the basis of a truly interdisciplinary dialogue. Based on our findings, we created a synthetic model of wisdom (see Figure 1). Our model defines a wise person as one who is able to evince all of the following nine qualities along three basic dimensions: self development, empathy, and self-transcendence in the affective dimension; self-knowledge, understanding, and knowledge of limits in the cognitive dimension; and integrity, maturity in relationships, and commitment in the conational dimension.

While wise persons are ascribed, genotypically, to possess all nine components, we agreed that, phenotypically, the dynamic configuration of their personal searches for wisdom will vary depending on individual and contextual variables. Heuristically presented as separate cells, our model nonetheless acknowledges the synergistic interaction of feeling, thought, and action that is the hallmark of wisdom. And here is where an historian’s skills became useful to behavioral scientists. I could help us put individual attributes into social context. The study of persons who seem to embody human wisdom illuminate the unique configurations of wisdom within individual lives and the shared forms that derive from gendered experience. In the course of our exegesis, it was clear to us that Job grew wiser in part because he confronted gender-specific challenges: He incorporated seemingly feminine attributes that transformed and integrated him. We hypothesized that reviewing the life of a wise woman would probably reveal a different constellation of changes.

To test this premise, we then examined the life of an extraordinary 20th-century political reformer and religious figure, Dorothy Day. We chose our subject deliberately. We found that Day’s life demonstrates both her wisdom and the gender-specific struggles that shaped her development. Friends, psychiatrists, and ordinary people all were struck by the “complex impulses” crystallized in the thoughts, feelings and actions of Dorothy Day (1897-1980). One biographer notes that “she was at once thoroughly modern and deeply traditional: socially committed yet uninterested in power, devoted to ideas yet absorbed by elemental concerns, ambitious yet unassuming, completely American and Catholic to her fingertips.” Dorothy Day’s journey toward wisdom can be traced over six decades, beginning with her thinly disguised autobiographical novel, *The Eleventh Virain* (1934), through two autobiographies, *From Union Square to Rome* (1938) and *The Long Loneliness* (1952), then through her columns (significantly, after 1946, called “On Pilgrimage”), and in retrospect from a series of biographies and personal reminiscences. Day was a

person who became more and more unflinching in her introspection yet seemingly tireless in her concern for those less fortunate. Consistent throughout was her piercing honesty about herself and her relationships—though it must be quickly added that her later accounts merely allude to her attempted suicide after an abortion in her twenties. As she matured, she became more theocentric:

We must build up leaders. And the leaders must first change themselves. And the job is so hard, so gigantic in this, our day of chaos, that there is only one motive that can make it possible for us to live in hope—that motive of the love of God. There is a natural love for our brother, our mate, yes, but even that does not endure unless it is animated by the love of God.

Even her fervid affection for co-worker Peter Maurin, “The French peasant, whose spirit and ideas will dominate the rest of *The Long Loneliness* as they will the rest of my life”—never compared to her spiritual devotion to God. But that passion did not consume her all of a sudden; it only became apparent to her in the course of her search for a transcendent wisdom that informed her deepest thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Dorothy Day affords us important insights into the role that gender may have played in her sense of her own self-development. In her second autobiography (1952), she espouses fairly stereotypic notions about differences between males and females who are committed to social justice:

Men who are revolutionaries, I thought, do not dally on the side as women do, complicating the issue by an emphasis on the personal. I am quite ready to concede now that men are the singleminded, the pure of heart, in these movements. Women, by their very nature are more materialistic, thinking of home, the children, and of all things needful to them, especially love. And in their constant searching after it, they go against their own best interests...I wanted the privileges of the women and the work of the man, without following the work of the woman. I wanted to go on picket lines, to go to jail, to write, to influence others and so make my mark on the world.

How much ambition and how much self-seeking there was in all this!

Notice how Day ascribes fairly rigid gender-specific roles in characterizing the desires and vocations of men and women. Day reveals her own sex-role conflicts in the “ideal types” with which she describes women as “materialistic” and men as “pure of heart”—all in a voice that denounces her own selfish intent. Following her calling in ways that defied the conventions of her times did not preclude Day from becoming a successful mother or a supportive mentor to younger men and women who sought her counsel. Even so, a paradoxical gender-specific motif is manifest in her published accounts:

I was lonely, deadly lonely. I was to find out then, as I found out so many times, over and over again, that women especially are social beings, who are not content with just husband and family, but must have a community, a group, an exchange with others...Men may go

away and become desert Fathers, but there were no desert Mothers (Day 1952, pp. 157-158.).

Dorothy Day's search for wisdom was that of a solitary reformer who formed Eucharistic communities committed to radical change. Self-effacing and often lonely in her thoughts, Dorothy Day knew that her gender informed her identity. In some ways very strong, forceful, and competent, her sense of herself as a woman often empowered her to effectively demonstrate her principles in unconventional ways for her times. At the same time, her genuine sense of humility caused her to defer authority to others in stereotypically "feminine" ways. Yet, the unique combination of attributes stretched female-related roles of nurturing, of sharing responsibility, and of seeing one's life in universal terms into an exemplary demonstration of her wisdom.

Fueled by the notion that gender and age affect the spiritual development associated with growing wiser, I sought other postwar figures who had come to terms with his or her identity. The approach of integrating age and gender issues can be illustrated in a case study of Erik Erikson and his life partner, Joan Erikson. As noted above, Erikson offered the first full-scale elaborations of his epigenetic model of human development in 1950. He was invited to prepare source material to be used by researchers and practitioners in the field of child health and welfare at the Mid-century White House Conference on Children and Youth. The conference's Fact Finding Committee centered on a single question: "How can we rear an emotionally healthy generation?" Organizers of the White House Conference asked the Josiah Macy Foundation to convene a Symposium on the Health Personality under the auspices of its multidisciplinary series on "problems of infancy and childhood." Erikson's contribution, in collaboration with this wife, was "Growth and Crises of the 'Health Personality.'" I will argue that Erikson's model is really the Eriksons' model.

To this first joint effort, the partners brought complementary strengths and shared insights. Joan M. Erikson was a dancer, an artist who met Erik while also undergoing analysis in Vienna. For the first two decades of their marriage she had worked with her husband in creating new learning milieu as they raised their three children. Everyday experiences counted in their theories. "The laws of physical development become highly important when we speak of the growth of personality," the Eriksons wrote, "because such development follows the successive levels of the organism's readiness to interact with the opportunities offered in the environment.

The Eriksons' "epigenetic diagram" mapped out a sequence of stages with components interacting over the life cycle: "Each item exists in some form before 'its' decisive and critical time normally arrives." Originally the Eriksons formulated a 7-stage model, though the pair felt that they had moved beyond Shakespeare's description. Just before a speech in Los Angeles to a group of psychologists and psychiatrists, at which Erik intended for the first time to test reactions to the framework, Joan realized that they had omitted their own place on the continuum: "The seven chart stages jumped from 'Intimacy' (stage six) to 'Old Age'...we surely need another stage." So while waiting for Erik's train, the pair added an eighth stage "Generativity vs. Stagnation"—between sixth and seventh stage. The new style embodied a procreative, productive, and generous stage of life concerned with car-

ing. Their description of the stage recalls Abraham's relations with Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac: the eighth stage for Erik and Joan was that act of creativity Abraham had also engaged in during a generative phase of his life.

This last-minute revision in the epigenetic model was a defining moment. The model needed greater critical scrutiny, not simply empirical verification. Just as Erik and Joan had appreciated the irony of Shakespeare having omitted "play" from his conception of human development, so too the Eriksons were prepared to acknowledge that they had slighted some of adulthood's important challenges. The Eriksons had made neither space nor time for themselves—or others at their stage of life. Owning up to this flaw henceforth deterred them from generalizing too broadly across individual, generational, and historical time. Intentional self-reflexivity became part of their ongoing scientific awakening to nuances and continuities inherent in their model.

No wonder, then, Erik Erikson chose to describe the first edition of *Childhood and Society* (1950) as "a subjective book, a conceptual itinerary." Erikson saw himself becoming "maybe a new kind of historian in committing himself to influencing what he observes." Like Abram the nomad he "came to psychology from art," and then worked "face to face" with children in a small American school in Vienna. But Erikson's behavior also resembled Adam's. Aware that multidisciplinary was a dubious academic objective, Erikson the Adamic Scientist offered *Childhood and Society* as a "blueprint of our method" so other analysts could test the cogency of its theory and data for understanding the relationship of the ego to society. "This is a book on childhood...Long childhood makes a technical and mental virtuoso out of man, but it also leaves a lifelong residue of emotional immaturity in him." Fittingly, *Childhood and Society* was dedicated to "our children's children." Writing a foreword to the second edition of *Childhood and Society* thirteen years later, Erikson italicized the phrase "conceptual itinerary." The phrase, he noted, "caught my eye." He went on to claim that his students at Harvard urged him not to make "drastic changes" in the text," as if tampering with an itinerary written in younger years was not one of an older man's prerogatives." Erikson gave another reason for limiting his revisions: "I have come to the conclusion that the book's shortcomings are inseparable from its character as a record of the first phase of one worker's itinerary and that like many first voyages it provides impressions which on re-visiting prove resistant to undoing or doing over." Consistent with his own epigenetic model, Erikson wished to return periodically to his original awakening to gauge how much progress he had made on his journey.

As he aged, Erikson awakened more fully to the possibilities and contrarities of the second half of life: "It is only too obvious that, so far in man's total development, adulthood and maturity have rarely been synonymous." Moving back to California in 1975, he and his wife became involved in joint community ventures designed to combat racism, sexism, ageism, and prejudices against the "mentally disturbed." Twelve years later, the couple returned to Cambridge where they were lionized as wise elders. Both Eriksons thereafter focused on maturity and old age in their writings. Note how the Eriksons resemble both archetypal couples in Genesis. Like Abraham and Sarah, the Eriksons stayed the course, and in the process, discovered that their awakening was even richer than first imagined. Like Adam and Eve, they subjected their hypotheses to critical analyses and relied on empirical

insights. Shifts in the historical climate altered the context of late-life choices. There is, the Eriksons reported in their seventies, “something paradoxical...happening to those ‘self-governing’ middle years.” Yet there is a key difference between these ancient and modern couples: Joan’s role changes as Erik’s productivity wanes.

The Eriksons’ appreciation for gender complementarity ran deep. All along, Erik had acknowledged Joan’s role in his work. “Joan Erikson always edits what I write,” he wrote in the preface to *Id* (1968). “Nobody knows better what I want to say, and nobody could be more careful to let me say it in my own way and, if need be, in overlong sentences.” Those who watched how the pair interacted recognized Joan’s critical role as “able editor, collaborator, and supporter of his efforts...Joan Erikson has confirmed and enhanced Erikson’s clinical understanding and clarity of style.” And they laughed together: theirs was a working partnership from the start. Still, Joan approached life-cycle issues differently from her husband. She taught school while nursing her eldest child. In 1951, Mrs. Erikson was invited to develop an arts activities program for patients at Austen Riggs, and later established similar programs elsewhere. Joan Erikson wrote poetry and pursued her interests in the arts. It is worth noting that Mrs. Erikson initially did not fully verbalize her sense of her own awakening or her distinctive contributions to refining the epigenetic model. “Weaving with words has not come easily for me,” she acknowledged. “Dancing, doing, making were my ways of saying something.” During the last quarter-century of their marriage, however, Joan Erikson wove words. “I have spent years living with and examining the relationship of the senses to the wisdom that is supposed to come to fruition in old age. The search has been an expansive one encompassing the life cycle.” Mrs. Erikson thought that she understood the model “completely in all of its ramifications,” but she “never really thoroughly grasped all of its implications...until the threads themselves had duplicated the black-and-white chart.” Erikson’s weaving enabled people to see and to feel how contrapuntal waves of color set up a warp of rich shadings.

Both Eriksons pondered the relationship of religion and spirituality to well-being in old age. Erik’s Jewish roots were an integral part (but only a facet) of his identity. By his mid-seventies, if not before, he was “not only willing but determined to live on the shadowy borderline of the denominational ambiguities (whether national or religious, political or professional) into which I seem to have been born.” In his 1973 Jefferson lectures, Erikson described how the third president searched for the “authentic” sayings of Jesus. Erik’s own interpretation of “The Galilean Sayings and the Sense of ‘I’” several years later traced the symbolic nexus “of the I with an inner eye full of light.” The tension between wisdom and despair in the last stage fused a transcendent “integrity of experience” amidst declining bodily capacities and fleeting time. “Wisdom, then, is a detached and yet active concern with life in the face of death.”

Despite commonality of themes, there are critical differences in the 1978 and 1988 interpretations. In the earlier piece Erikson was didactic: he used his analysis of Dr. Borg’s crises to “present a conception of the life cycle and the generational life cycle...in my own words.” Rewriting the article for *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, Erikson let Bergman’s storyline dictate his interpretation: “We can best begin to demonstrate more pictorially some of the dynamics of the interwoven stages of human life, as they culminate in old age, by outlining the scenes and themes that

reveal, in Bergman's drama, an old man's search for his life's transcendent meaning; and by claiming that all old people are involved in some such search, whether they—or we—know it or not."

The *Life Cycle Completed* (1982) placed the epigenetic theory into a psychosocial, historical context. While reaffirming that adulthood "is the link between the individual life cycle and the cycle of generations," Erikson decided to "go further and begin my account of the stages with the last one, old age, to see how much sense a review of the completed life cycle can make of its whole course." The tone was autobiographical: "It was in our 'middle years' that we formulated it—at a time in which we certainly had no intention of (or capacity for) imagining ourselves as really old. This was only a few decades ago; and yet, the predominant image of old age was then altogether different." Even after publication, Erikson recognized that "the role of old age had to be reobserved, rethought." He returned before his death to his copy of *The Life Cycle Completed*, underlining in red, green, and blue ink those passages that pleased him and others that irked him. He told his wife that he intended to make additional revisions. Erik's own aging awakened in him a sense that he did not yet fully comprehend the last stage's limitations.

Joan, meanwhile, became prolific in her eighth decade. To Joan, the daughter of an Anglican minister and author of a book on Saint Francis, reverence for God inspired poetry. Through her hymns of praise she could sing about what filled her whole being with optimism and vivacity: "God is an awesome spirit—and we must worship the awesome in spirit and in truth." And she probed dimensions of old age in ways that went beyond Erik's thinking in at least two ways. First, Mrs. Erikson questioned whether the eighth stage, as formulated in 1950, fully embraced the experiences that came with added years of longevity. In *Wisdom and the Senses* (1988), Joan envisioned a confrontation in "final maturity" activated by withdrawal, not wisdom: "Perhaps there should be a ninth stage indicated, because there is, inevitably, one further challenge. The struggle may be a long or short one, but one would surely have to face it and live it through with integrity."

Joan Erikson in her nineties has become a modern Muse, undeterred by barriers that had constrained women in biblical and classical times. In contrast to her husband's clinical tenor, she writes in a more personal tone. Living independently on Cape Cod, Joan has an intense need to "see" Nature, human and otherwise, and to "touch" the "inner" recesses of the Self, despite pains and feelings of emptiness. After Erik's death, Joan herself revisited *The Life Cycle Completed*, updating the epigenetic model with her own ideas and experiences. Mrs. Erikson fleshed out possible stage(s) of life beyond the one called "Old Age" in the original formulation: "I am persuaded that if elders can come to terms with the dystonic elements in their life experiences in the ninth stage, they may successfully make headway on the pathway leading to Gero-transcendence..(which demands of us an honest and steadfast humility.)"

Three conclusions emerge from this study. First, there is not a single sequence of events. Some people may not "awaken" to their relationship to the ultimate path (or, as those who stress Wisdom's "feminine" face to Sophia) until after they have suffered, or reintegrated themselves into some com-

munity. I am now realizing, on the basis of readings in 20th Century American writers that—awakening, suffering, brokenness, re-newal, re-membling, re-integrating, and re-turning are in and of themselves pathways to growing wiser. How and why people may end up on one pathway and then another (or on none at all) remain mysteries of human aging.

Second, one can return time and again to each of these pathways. Those who have never suffered surely do not know what they have been spared. But those who have suffered rarely have an easier time of it, stoic attitudes notwithstanding, the next time around. This is why I hyphenate the last four pathways in the preceding paragraph. The search for wisdom is an iterative process.

Finally, few of us search for wisdom alone. I do not mean to discount the importance of the Desert Fathers. Yet the truth of the matter is that most people who consciously seek to grow wiser do not live monastic lives. We count on our loved ones, our friends, and the kindness of strangers to aid us along our way.

And so we end, as T.S. Elliot would indicate we should, where we began. My own intellectual pursuit of wisdom is animated by personal experiences in the University, at the altar, or conventions and at home. Yet the formal inquiry is possible only in a multidisciplinary center that affords me the freedom to roam, thankfully without much accountability.

Ironically, though all multidisciplinary institutes ultimately must build on their own inherent strengths, their future in the academic setting hinges on their success as risk-takers drawing intellectual resources from many quarters. They should build research partnerships that, for however long they endure, are capable of dealing with a pressing intellectual problem in a manner that fully embraces the possibility of complete failure. Only then have they a chance to succeed. Hence it is appropriate that you are going to rely on partnerships with people with different expertise across the State of North Carolina. This will give you a competitive advantage few enjoy.

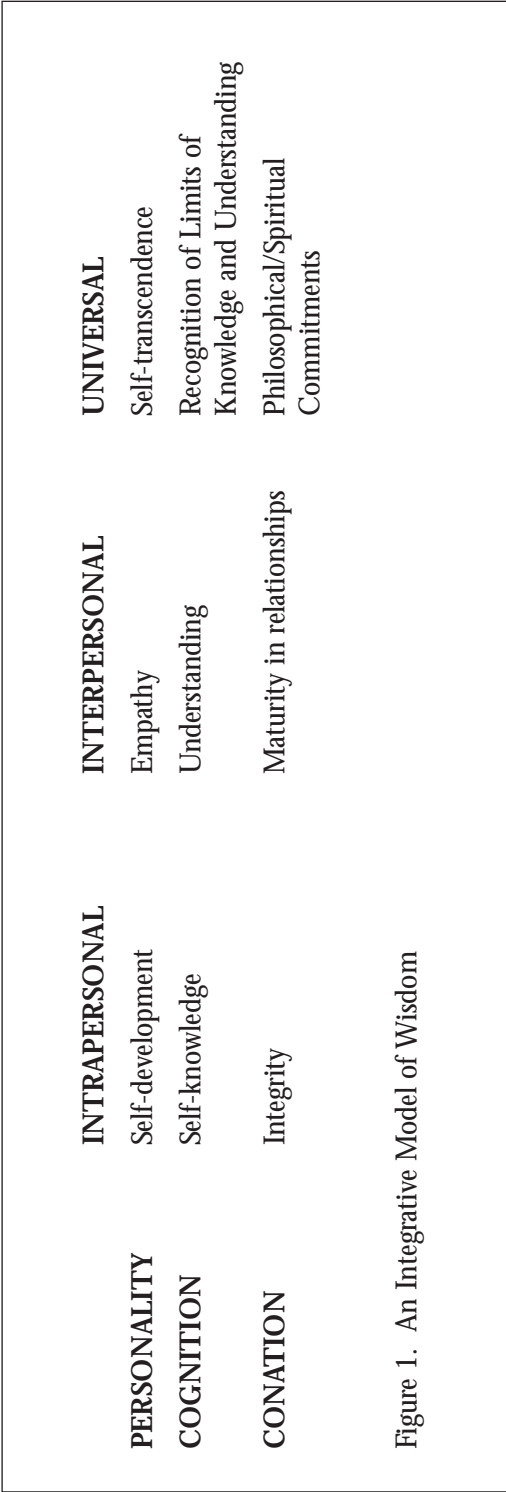


Figure 1. An Integrative Model of Wisdom

Cover photo of Wilson Library courtesy Dan Sears, UNC News Services
 700 copies of the public document were printed at a cost of \$738.30 or \$1.05 per copy

for more information contact:

UNC Institute on Aging

Campus Box #1030

University of North Carolina

Chapel Hill, NC 27599-1030

Telephone: (919) 966-9444

FAX: (919) 966-0510

World Wide Web: www.aging.unc.edu