

## WHERE SHALL WISDOM BE FOUND?

**Richard Bowman**

Stanley L. Olsen Chair of Moral Values 2007-2010

Opening Convocation  
Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD  
September 5, 2007

Have you noticed, in your comings and goings around campus the last few days, a sculpture of three owls standing back to back? This sculpture is, more or less, in the center of campus, and I like to think that it represents what Augustana College is all about.

This sculpture was created over two decades ago by legendary Augustana art professors Palmer Eide and Ogden Dalrymple and is entitled "Hindsight, Insight, and Foresight." The citation at the base of the sculpture is from the biblical book of Proverbs and counsels "seek ye wisdom and gain understanding." Or in a more contemporary translation: "get wisdom; get insight."

This counsel from the wisdom of teachers of ancient Israel suggests that wisdom is different from knowledge. Wisdom leads to understanding or insight. Wisdom is not merely the accumulation of facts and theorems, the acquisition of dates and experimental data, or the recitation of information without appropriate interpretative context. Unlike knowledge, wisdom leads to a deeper, more profound understanding of both human

nature and the nature of our world. It offers insights into relationships between people, relationships between humans and their environment, and relationships between all aspects of creation and their Creator.

Not only do they advocate for the attainment of wisdom, but the Hebrew wisdom sages also inquire into the process by which wisdom is obtained. Hence one of the wisdom teachers who contributed to the book of Job asks the pertinent question: "Where shall wisdom be found?" Since this Israelite wisdom teacher posed the question over two millennia ago, the answer--obvious maybe to us--was not Augustana College. Instead this ancient sage considers a variety of options, rejecting each one in turn. The sage concludes that wisdom cannot be mined from the earth like silver; nor can it be recovered from the depths of the sea. Wisdom cannot be purchased for gold, neither can it be exchanged for jewels. Its price exceeds that of pearls.

Where then is wisdom to be found? If we today were to entertain this question of the ancient sages regarding the location of wisdom, how would we respond? Is wisdom found through the more traditional printed word--in the Harry Potter canon or in the collected works of Shakespeare; or is wisdom somewhere on the internet, in cyberspace--on You Tube, My Space, or Face Book? Or is it in our ACT scores and our GPA? Is wisdom in our mission statements and our business plans? Maybe

wisdom is in the liberal arts curriculum, or even then perhaps only one specific academic discipline. Is it in the academic program, or in service learning projects? Is it in the traditional classroom, or in travel abroad experiences? Is it in the sequence of courses for a major, or in an individual course syllabus and reading list?

Where shall wisdom be found? The Eide/Dalrymple sculpture offers other provisional answers. My friend and colleague Steve Thomas recently helped me understand the history and significance of the owl sculpture. Its creators intentionally placed it next to the Commons in the center of the campus to encourage us to ponder the greater purpose of a college education. Originally it was in a garden. Built-in benches at the bottom of the sculpture invited people to sit and contemplate the location of wisdom at Augustana College. These original intentions, as with most original intentions, have been compromised. The garden is now more of a concrete patio. Although the built-in benches remain, they have been displaced by separate, wooden and even plastic benches. Even with the displacement and the compromising of original intentions, the owl sculpture itself still invites us to consider the location of wisdom on our campus.

Apart from their role in the Harry Potter novels as messengers, the owl is a traditional, cross cultural symbol of

wisdom. This sculpture has three owls: one representing the wisdom of hindsight, one representing the wisdom of foresight, and one representing the wisdom of insight.

The owl representing hindsight faces the Humanities Building and beyond that the Elman Center. As such, the owl seems to be wondering what wisdom can be learned from the accumulated experience and historical perspective of the humanities and from the athletic traditions of fitness, competition, and recreation. What insights come through literature and languages, through religion and theatre, through the visual arts and the skills of verbal communication? What are the connections between a healthy body and a wise mind?

The owl representing a foresight faces the Madsen Center and Gilbert Science Center. At the feet of this owl is a baby owl. The foresight owl then seems to be contemplating the future of this baby owl. How will research in psychology and economics, chemistry and biology shape the future of this young owl? What will new understandings from the social sciences contribute to the way we think about ourselves and our world; and in what ways will new discoveries from the natural sciences change the lives of both young and old alike?

The owl representing insight faces the administration building. The eyes of this owl are interesting. They are not open wide, but squeezed together in a squinty-eyed skepticism as

if wonder: is there really wisdom in the administration building? Is there wisdom in vision statements and strategic plans, in marketing logos and branding slogans, in advancement brochures and enrollment projections? What wisdom is there in administrative decisions regarding the future of the college?

Where then shall wisdom be found: through insight emanating from administration; through hindsight preserved by the humanities and athletics; through foresight spawned from research in the social and natural sciences? The wisdom sage of Job finally concludes: "God understands the way to it, and the deity knows its place." On the basis of this conclusion, this ancient teacher's advice to humans is: "truly, fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Let's pause for a moment for a footnote on this phrase "fear of the Lord." On one hand the phrase is not as threatening as it might seem, and on the other it is even more commanding. It is not as threatening because the Hebrew word typically translated as "fear" does not mean "be terrified of God." Acquiring wisdom does not mean looking for a big rock to hide behind. Yet it is even more commanding since this great Hebrew word "yara" is better translated not as "fear" but as "reverence," reverence in the sense of "belief in," "trust in," and "commitment to." Reverence for God, belief in God, trust in God, commitment to God, is the beginning of wisdom.

From this biblical perspective the quest for wisdom originates through a responsive relationship with God. Consider what this means: if the attainment of wisdom begins with a reverence for God, then study is a sacred act. Along with the chapel, the classroom is sacred space. The library is sacred space. All our study spaces are sacred. Wherever we study we are in the presence of God.

Reverence before God is the beginning of wisdom. Notice that this key phrase in the wisdom traditions of the Bible says only beginning, not end. The quest for wisdom begins with God, but it does not end there. Biblical religion is never just about you and your relationship with God. It always includes our relationship with other people.

Hence when the wisdom teachers of Proverbs introduce their teachings by asking the very basic questions: "why study?" and "why acquire wisdom?" here is how they answer: through study and the acquisition of wisdom, they assert, the student "gains instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity." If we are to be successful in life, we will interact with others on the basis of justice and righteousness. These are key biblical terms which specify an active concern for the well-being of others. From a biblical perspective, the wise person lives not only in a responsive relationship with God but in a responsible relationship other people. Wisdom is not so

much learned as lived out in a just and equitable relationship with others.

Where then is wisdom to be found? The answer from the perspective of the biblical wisdom traditions is: in a responsive relationship to God and in a responsible relationship to other people. Given this, I hope that the answer is also Augustana College. Through our pursuit of wisdom, not just attainment of knowledge, I hope we grow from the hindsight perspective of the humanities and athletics, I hope we pursue new understandings through the social and natural sciences, and I hope we benefit from the insights of President Oliver and his administrative team. Exactly how this is accomplished is up to us. Whether we have been here for days or for decades, the Eide/Dalrymple owl sculpture invites us to contemplate our own acquisition of whatever wisdom is to be found at Augustana College.

Will we accumulate the technical knowledge for building weapon systems, or will we acquire the wisdom to negotiate peace; will we learn the techniques for engineering a corporate takeover, or will we gain the wisdom to enact a social justice which protects the rights of all individuals; will we graduate seeking wealth and status for ourselves, or will we venture forth from this place to serve others in the world community.

In the days and weeks and even years ahead, I urge you ponder these and other similar wisdom questions as they relate to your education. In so doing I invite to take advantage of this gift of the owl sculpture in the center of our campus: sit on its stone benches, gaze out across the sight lines of the three owls, and reflect on how you will live out its motto "seek wisdom, acquire understanding."