



*Growing in Wisdom and  
Stature: The Leadership  
Practice of Lifelong Learning*

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## ***Growing in Wisdom and Stature: The Leadership Practice of Lifelong Learning***

*Luke 2:41-52, and Sirach 39:1-11*

### **Introduction**

I'm fascinated by the re-emergence of wizards in popular culture. We have Dumbledore in Harry Potter, a television production of Ursula LeGuinn's "Wizard of Earthsea," and my favorite, Gandalf, in the Tolkien Lord of the Rings trilogy made into movies. According to the back-story that Tolkein wrote for the Lord of the Rings (1980, p. 395 ff.), Gandalf was a more-than-human figure, sent by the "angels" in the western realm to guide and assist "Middle Earth" in the continued fight against the evil of Sauron. A member of an "order of wizards," Gandalf the Grey was limited by his human frame, and while he knew much, he also had to continue to learn and grow in his wisdom. For example, when he discovered that the ring of the Hobbit Frodo Baggins was possibly "the one ring that binds them all," he hurried off to the library-archives of Gondor to study up on the ring and its history. In his continued growth in wisdom, he, like all of us humans, had to ask the same question the people of Jerusalem asked the Apostles in response to the experience of Pentecost and Peter's preaching: "What then shall we do?" Gandalf is a model of the wise one, member of a community of the wise, who cannot rest on accumulated or given wisdom, whose love of learning drives him to continued study and reflection before he formulates a plan of action.

Evidence is abundant that old-line churches, such as the denominations which make up the constituency of Louisville Seminary, are facing a crisis in ministerial health and effectiveness. That crisis has many points of origin, but one that has been documented is that many ministers carry on their work without adequate preparation and continue to serve without consistent updating of both the theory and skills needed. As our colleagues at the Wayne Oates Institute here in Louisville point out, (Hammon and Hollon, 2004) the body of knowledge for ministry is doubling every four years. That would mean that the expertise of Louisville Seminary's Class of 1999 has lapsed. That would really mean that some of my own mates of the class of 1969, with shelves full of yellowing and probably dusty books from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are seriously out of date and out of touch. UNLESS, of course, those folks have been carefully, intentionally engaging in "the Practice of Lifelong Learning." What we are lacking in the churches of 2005 is regular, consistent pursuit of new ideas, new theories, new methods, and new energy in continuing education. We are running short of wisdom.

### **The Sage as the Model for Lifelong Learning**

My own study of the social sciences, particularly systems theory, and my awareness of the deep connections between systems thinking, the new physics, and process theology, has prompted me to go back and look at the wisdom literature in the Bible, where I rediscovered the sages. The title of this address is from the description of Jesus; in his very human childhood and youth, he increased in wisdom and in stature, or wisdom and maturity. Clearly the work of Christ was not only prophet, priest, and king, but also a practitioner of wisdom (Borg, 1995, and Sherwin, 2004, make this point). Beyond Jesus, wisdom is a key part of the Canon from the dream-interpretations of Joseph, through the writings of Yeshua ben Sira. That wisdom is deeply rooted in creation, taught by the wonders of nature and the infinitely variable phenomenon of human nature in all its goodness and brokenness. Wisdom takes into account the holy that dwells in the innermost heart of hearts. It wonders at mystical union and existential struggle. It grapples with the real presence and threat of evil around us and within us. Are these not matters that attract the attention of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

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Reformed Christianity has lifted up the roles of prophet (proclamation), priest (sacramental worship), and monarch (church governance), and even a nod to the rabbi (teaching), but has generally diminished the sages' wise discernment and guidance. In this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I propose that we reframe the practice of lifelong learning of ministry in the light of the sages. There were sages before the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, and after the roles of prophet and priest and king faded, the rabbis adopted much of the ways of wisdom. Serving in many roles in their communities, the early sages were women as well as men, as we see in 2 Samuel 14 with the wise woman of Tekoa and 2 Samuel 20 with the wise woman of Abel. (Fontaine, 1992, pp. 25-47). They used metaphors, aphorisms, parables, and stories to negotiate with the powerful, to heal, and to provide rituals for the community. Walter Brueggemann calls them the "practical theologians of the Bible" (1997, p. 685) because they appear to have operated on a set of hermeneutic or interpretive rules that helped them to offer counsel to specific situations of life. These hermeneutical rules look very much like what we teach and practice as praxis or practical theology today.

In our reading this morning from Yeshua ben Sira, a teacher of wisdom in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE, and his writing in the book of Sirach found in the Apocryphal literature, we get a peek into the model of the sage as both conservator of truth and teacher of a way of life suitable to the circumstances of a particular era. In the prologue to the book, ben Sira is described by his grandson as a "lover of learning." The model of the sage for Lifelong Learning focuses on this term, "the love of learning."

It might seem hard to disagree with such a simple, straightforward approach to wise, mature leadership in the church. Nonetheless, the concept of a practice of lifelong learning has fallen on hard times in our churches. Several studies in the past few years point this out. The results of the Hartford, the Pew, the Alban, and the Presbyterian Pension Board studies agree that church leaders run into difficulties when they make the transition from seminary to church life, and they continue to have difficulties in mid-career. What's missing, the studies suggest, is continuing, intentional, energized, safe, theologically informed study and reflection that leads to wisdom.

**How and When We Learn**

Let's reflect on when and how we learn. Definitely, we need to accept the fact that "you don't learn everything you need for ministry in seminary." Much of what is needed for effective ministry can only be learned "on the job" in situations in which the learner is directly responsible and accountable for the well-being of a congregation.

Learning for ministry takes place in three significant phases. The preparation phase includes early discernment of call, and, for some, enculturation into the church. The second phase happens in seminary, but in two parts. The seminary creates a foundation of learning with a solid, working familiarity in the classical and practical disciplines of the faith and of the church. We've got to know and be comfortable operating inside the rules of hermeneutics as we deal with scripture and with the faith traditions and doctrines of our denominations. Alongside the classical disciplines, seminary students need to learn how to function in church leadership roles with the basics of the practice of ministry. The second part of what we need from seminary is that love of learning, that sense of joy in discovery, a curiosity or openness to a sense of wonder in new experiences. The third phase of learning happens on the job, over a lifetime of discerning what we're supposed to do next. I learned from a friend who flies airplanes that when you get your pilots license, you are told that it is simply a "license to learn." (an idea lent me by Chris Hammon). The ideal is that we all

stay so much in love with learning that we would never want to be far away from a community that was grappling with the latest thinking about Bible, theology, church leadership, and practices of caring and public ministry.

We can't go into a full discourse here about what learning is and how it works. My own philosophy is that learning is experiential and transformative. Learning is adapting. It is the way we utilize our experience to change. It is not that far from the hermeneutical model of the Sages. It is a topic for a later discussion, but I suspect that praxis and learning are closely related—like cousins, or siblings, or twins!

From a theological perspective, then, we can define Lifelong Learning as:

- based in experience,
- practiced in a prayerful or discernment mode,
- ecclesial rather than individual or private in nature,
- and transformative in the sense that it lends itself to the growth and sanctification of individuals and the redemption of society.
- As a practice of wisdom or of praxis it is both value laden and theory intensive.

This is how I imagine a 21<sup>st</sup>-century “praxis” model of learning that promotes the growth of wisdom and maturity in religious leaders.

### **The LPTS Lifelong Learning Community**

As is now evident, I have focused today on the lifelong learning of those who are set aside to formal occupations of ministerial leadership, sometimes called “the clergy.” This is not to diminish the need for the practice of lifelong learning for all Christians, who are, of course called to ministry. This address is aimed more narrowly at the seminary, its students and faculty, and its graduates who are practicing religious leadership in at least part of their life occupations.

Now, I am ready to propose a program of Lifelong Learning for Louisville Seminary. That program is not consumer based, offered to individuals to meet their private needs. Instead we need to create here a Lifelong Learning Community. That means, when students come to seminary, let's welcome them, though not as consumers who are here to fill their shopping cart with knowledge that they desire. Rather, let's welcome them into a community that shapes and forms the experiences of learning they have here, both for building that foundation of a body of knowledge, and for engendering a love of learning. And when they graduate, let's not “fire them” with pomp and circumstance and a pink slip suitable for framing. They graduate in the literal sense of ascending to the next rung of their life work, but they continue to be members of the Lifelong Learning Community.

I envision two new activities for this new community. The first way we would live out this Community is to encourage every member, and that would mean the professional learners we call faculty, the students, and the graduates to pause at critical moments on their learning paths to create learning goals for themselves, based on the principles of the community. I have composed a list of four questions designed to help us all become intentional about the praxis of learning. At different stages of life and career in ministry, let us prayerfully ask ourselves:

1. **What has changed** or what needs to change in ministry? This asks the learner to reflect on the current situation in the context of ministry, not only local but societal and global as well, including issues of diversity. My research indicates that most conflict in congregations is about change and either the turbulence change brings or the symptoms that arise from resisting it. Lifelong Learners need to recognize change as it is happening around them.
2. **What do I need to learn** to meet the changing situation? The Lifelong Learner responds to change by being willing to adapt in response. This requires what John Kotter calls "Risk Taking: the willingness to push oneself out of comfort zones and to learn from both successes and failures" (1996, p. 183).
3. **How can I promote my own health and growth** in a changing situation? The self—body, mind, soul, emotions—is the primary tool of ministry, an instrument of Christ's work, and keeping that tool healthy and whole, as well as open to transformation, is essential.
4. **Where can I find help** or partners to get what I need? While there may be some things we can learn by ourselves, the greater challenges of ministry require collaborative effort by finding support groups—either face-to-face or online, spiritual direction, therapy, mentoring, and/or formal teaching to push ourselves to real, difficult, and sometimes painful adaptive, transforming learning.

These questions will provide both the motivation for and the content of the lifelong learning that follows. We will need to prepare some faculty and others to be willing to serve as learning mentors for members of the community to help them work through the four steps in setting these goals and pursuing learning for wisdom.

As a second project, the seminary needs to provide a support structure for the community in its dispersed state by building on our Alum Online Community, eventually to make online connections available to every member of the learning community. This might involve a nominal fee for annual membership, but free to graduates in their first year away from seminary. I would want us to have a frequently published online journal which functions as both newsletter and disseminator of ideas and suggestions for progressive learning. The seminary can also build on the outstanding technical facility and staff to provide more and more distance learning opportunities so that graduates who are called to places far away from Louisville can have easy access to the community.

In this newly imagined Lifelong Learning Program, we would continue our good work in First Call Continuing Education; Lay Leadership Education; our on-campus Lifelong Learning conferences, workshops, lecture series, and certificate programs including a new certificate in African American Church Studies; and other experiences, which we offer in collaboration with denominations and interfaith organizations. The Doctor of Ministry Program would be integrated as one part of the whole range of options of Lifelong Learning opportunities to encourage church leaders to grow in wisdom and maturity.

### **The Winding Path of Lifelong Learning**

I like to imagine Lifelong Learning as a winding path. As a parable or metaphor, think of it for a moment as the “yellow brick road” of the *Wizard of Oz*. Frank Thomas, our Festival of Theology preacher for 2006, in his book, *Spiritual Maturity*, describes the wise, mature leader as one who practices clarity, decisiveness, and courage. We can use imagery from the *Wizard of Oz* story to apply those three concepts to Lifelong Learning.

You will remember the companions Dorothy took with her on the winding path to Oz, if not to lifelong learning. Besides her little dog, her faithfulness, and her joy, the first of her companions was the scarecrow. Assumed to lack a brain, the scarecrow represents the need for clarity or mindfulness of our own faith and values and goals. Clarity comes from a hermeneutic process of interpreting the scriptures, theology, and the wisdom of the world. Farther along the winding path, Dorothy met the tin man who was immobilized by indecisiveness. Clear thinking without a heart for decisive action can lead to rust. But clear-headed decisiveness is not always popular, and the decisions of wise mature leaders usually provoke opposition, represented in Oz by the witch, who saw herself as the victim of Dorothy’s arrival on the scene. In the face of such reactivity, the Lifelong Learner needs what the Lion needed—courage to stay on the path of wisely chosen actions. Like Dorothy, we eventually learn that we don’t need to find some wizard somewhere, who will give us the answers and provide the ultimate guidance. The wisdom is present to us, like the ruby slippers, in our community of learners. We have the wisdom and the power to find our way home in our own piety and integrity.

Thinking again about those questions leading to the learning goals, we can recall the scarecrow, the tin man, and the lion to help us figure out what we need to learn to meet the situations of our lives—are we lacking in interpretive minds, heart-filled resolution, or the inner strength of courage to stay the course? We’ll need companions on the road, and for that we’ll need a company of sages, the Lifelong Learning Community of Louisville Seminary, to be effective leaders in the church’s life for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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