

THE READING

THE CRACKED POT by Amy Friedman and Meredith Johnson

Once upon a time a woman named Chang Chang worked for a merchant in Sichuan province. The merchant's home was high atop a hill, and Chang Chang worked as the merchant's laundress. Every day she had to walk down the hill to collect water from the stream.

When she was young, Chang Chang made two pots to carry her water, and these she hung upon a pole she could carry over her shoulders. She painted one pot blue and the other red, and on each pot she painted flowers. Chang Chang loved flowers. And she loved her pots.

For some years she carried her pole down the hillside and collected water. Afterward she climbed the hill. She was strong and able, though she was growing older. And as time passed, the pots, too, grew old.

One day, as Chang Chang prepared to place the pole over her shoulders, she noticed the blue pot had a slender crack along its side.

She ran a finger over the crack and sighed, "My poor little pot."

For a few moments Chang Chang studied the crack. "Will you hold my water?" she whispered. But she decided she could still use the pot. As always she carried both pots down the hill and filled them with water to the very brim. By the time she reached the hilltop, the pot with a crack was half-empty, but this still left her plenty of water for doing the laundry.

For the next two years, Chang Chang carried those pots down the hillside every morning. When she reached the stream, she filled them to the brim, and afterward she walked back up the hill, balancing the pole across her shoulders. By the time she reached the house, the cracked blue pot was only half full — just enough for the laundry.

Each day Chang Chang examined the crack, and though it was growing a little longer, she decided all was well. What she didn't notice was that the poor blue pot was miserable. Each time it drank from the stream, it secretly hoped that this day all the water would stay inside its belly, but each day when they reached the top of the hill, the pot knew it had failed. The blue pot glanced at the red pot and saw water filled to the top, and the blue pot began to feel desolate.

In its resting place on the far side of Chang Chang's little hut, the blue pot worried and wept. "I'm no good, I'm no good, I'm no good!" the blue pot wailed.

"Stop your whining," the red pot answered. "No one wants to hear from a pot."

One day the blue pot woke and felt its crack beginning to expand. It was certain Chang Chang would soon decide to throw it away. Soon it would be no use to anyone for anything.

That morning, as Chang Chang climbed the hill, she was startled to hear a voice she had never heard. "Chang Chang," the voice said, "throw me away. I'm no good for anyone or anything."

Chang Chang stopped and looked around, wondering who could be speaking to her. "Hello?" she called down the hill.

But the voice that answered was very near. "I'm right here," said the blue pot, swinging this way and that to get Chang Chang's attention. "I'm your pot. The pot you made with your own two hands. The pot that has served you so well all these years. But I see now my time is

finished. The crack in my side has made me useless. When you carry me up the hill, I spill all my water. I'm no good!"

For a long moment Chang Chang stood very still, amazed that her pot had spoken. "Is that you?" she whispered, looking close. "Are you speaking, dear pot?"

"It is I!" the pot said. "I am so sorry I have failed you, but I have."

Chang Chang was overjoyed to know her pots were as full of life as she had always imagined, but she was sad to hear such sorrowful words. "But pot, you don't understand," she said. "You haven't been paying attention. Look around."

Chang Chang pointed to the path beside them, the path up the hill, and for the first time the pot stopped looking inward and instead looked out. On the right side of the hill the pot noticed beautiful flowers growing in abundance — poppies and peonies and chrysanthemum and narcissus and citron. A ribbon of color edged the path.

"And look at the other side of the hill," Chang Chang said.

The pot glanced to the other side and saw it was bare.

"I've always known about your flaw," Chang Chang said. "And so I planted seeds on your side of the path, and every day you water them and add more beauty to the world."

The blue pot was overjoyed. All its sadness was gone. It understood, just as Chang Chang always had, that every being has its unique flaws. And it is our little quirks and faults that make us and the world so interesting.

THE SERMON

This is the second time in all my years of ministry that I have undertaken a sermon about wisdom. That tells you something. Last time (17 years ago) I was not satisfied with what I produced, and I decided to give it another go this week. The fact is, it is an enormous topic that I have trouble reducing to a sermon. Robert Sternberg reassures me with his assertion that “To define wisdom is a task that requires more wisdom than any of us can have. Thus, we cannot quite comprehend the nature of wisdom because of our own lack of it.” I have fantasized more than once that I would stand here this morning and confess that I am still too wise, or not wise enough to take this on, and then announce the closing hymn.

There is less than universal agreement about the value of wisdom.

In their **Book of Jewish Wisdom**, Jacob and Noam Neusner defined “wisdom” as:
. . . the formulation . . . of experienced and sound judgement about living a well-considered life – one of proportion, foresight, good sense, and reflection. Wisdom records what humanity has learned from experience. Wisdom discerns out of many, comparable events, a governing truth and formulates that truth in rules to guide the formation of character and conduct and conscience. The opposite of wisdom is foolishness. For while the fool learns nothing from what happens and so repeats the same mistakes, the wise person draws conclusions from mistakes and acts upon them. The differences between the one and the other is never the first, but the second, act of stupidity, which only the fool commits.

That definition centers on “rules” that are derived out of experience. There are so many rules that have been derived out of experience in the past that we find repressive and ill-founded (such as those making women subservient, or those maligning homosexuality) that we are wary of submitting even to those rules that may have potential. Too often in the past, the rules have been discerned not by the “wise-ones” but by control freaks. We demand the right to make our own mistakes - to reinvent our own wheel.

While true wisdom is not time bound or culture bound or gender bound – wisdom is transcendent - wise Christians learn from wise Buddhists who learn from wise Muslims who learn from wise Jews who learn from wise Christians . It is clear to me that I see wisdom less as a what, than as a how. I rank the content as secondary to the characteristics of the wise persons themselves.

Many of us have been fortunate in our lives to have had encounters with people who seem to possess wisdom, people who have an extraordinary insight into life, who challenge us by their being, with the possibility of our being able to face life with a sense of balance.

It is a reality that the wise ones are always a tiny minority – most people never listen to them. There are, to the best of my knowledge, no records of wise cultures - the wise ones always stand out in contrast to the common values. Wisdom is not easily transferable from one person to another.

Going back to the Neusner's definition, most people seem able to make the same mistake over and over again without learning: it is the few who profit from their experience, and fewer still profit from the experience of others.

There are some characteristics that seem common to most of those who are deemed “wise ones -- and let me be explicit that while patriarchal language inclines us to refer to “wise-men,” in truth much of the wisdom in the past has been discerned by wise-women, sometimes referred to as crones. Although it is tempting, it is probably stereotyping to suggest that

women may have been more likely than males over the years to stand back and view life with perspective. It is most likely that such an ability is rare in both genders, and possible for both.

One of those characteristics of "wise-ones" is advanced age. As uncommon as is wisdom, it is rarer still in the young. Wisdom is not something with which people are born - it requires experiences from which learnings can be gleaned. Again, it is not automatic that we will learn from experience. There are people who, in thirty-five years on a job, repeat the same one year's experience thirty-five times. There are eighty-year old fools. Wisdom does not automatically come with age. Age is not sufficient, but it is generally necessary for wisdom. [Actually, I once had a 23 year old ministerial intern who was wise far beyond her years. She has, not surprisingly, become one of our outstanding ministers.] There are studies that show age is irrelevant and others which show that experience is helpful to the acquisition of wisdom.

Another necessary but not sufficient component of wisdom is knowledge. It is possible to know a great deal and understand little. There are people whose heads are so filled with knowledge that they can't believe that there is anything important that they do not know. There is an old Zen story about the prospective student who approached the master about becoming a disciple. The novice tried to impress the master with how bright he was. The master offered a cup of tea and proceeded to keep pouring after the cup was full. The student protested as the tea flowed over the table and onto the floor. The master suggested that the student, like that cup, was so full that there was no room to add any more. There are people who know a lot who are clearly NOT wise. Some suggest that wisdom comes from knowing how little you know, but there are some people who know little, are aware of it, and are still not wise.

Wisdom seems to require a significant amount of insight into one's self. If we are not able to be aware of the blinders which affect our perspective on the world, the biases that affect us, the passions that drive us, the fears that haunt us, it is virtually impossible to be open to experiences that challenge our preconceptions and to place our own experience into a larger context. Wise-ones are good and patient listeners who are able to hear the messages behind the words.

One of the characteristics of those who have wisdom is a significant humility, like that of Buckminster Fuller who confessed to being the most unlearned man he knew. He said, "I don't know anyone who has learned how little one knows as have I." One of the clues to a pretender to the title of wise one is the claiming of it. If someone says, "I am wise," you can safely bet that he or she is not. The very claim is a confession that he or she does not have their ego under control enough to have reliable perspective. The desire for acclaim is a proclamation of a need for recognition that signals a bias that distorts: such a person dares not to admit that they might be wrong because of the loss of face it would bring. Antonio Machado once said, "I give you counsel for I am an old man: never follow any counsel."

Another term for that humility is an acceptance of "fallibilism."

The wise people I have known, and all those I have heard of, have demonstrated significant patience. They are never in a hurry, because from their perspective time is transient anyhow. They think before speaking, they exercise their curiosity, consider alternatives, weigh consequences, and then decide and act, knowing they may still be wrong, which provides them with a new opportunity to learn. Reinhold Neibuhr once observed that there had been a time when he knew all the answers. "My real growth," he said, "began when I discovered that the questions to which I had the answers were not the important questions."

Because of the breadth of their perspective, truly wise ones in every culture have always been accepting of differences. They have been able to envision the essential oneness of humankind without demanding that all be just the same. They have not been judgmental of those who did not act in accordance with their wisdom, acknowledging that each must find his

or her own way on the path of life. It isn't that they don't have standards, it's that they are loathe to apply them to others.

The most difficult thing to grasp about the wise-ones for me is the tension between their detachment and their involvement. They radiate a sense of calmness, stemming from the breadth of their perspective. In the common language, they know "not to sweat the small stuff and that it is all small stuff." But at the same time, they have not resigned from the human race, they have not ceased to care. They are available for counsel, they offer guidance, but they never need to indoctrinate, and do not get anxious.

So, these are the characteristics I have suggested: age, experience, knowledge, insight into self, humility, patience, acceptance, non-judgmental, calm and caring.

My maternal grandfather was one of the wisest men I have known. While he spent his life in a very small town and had limited experiences, somehow he was able to transcend those boundaries and demonstrate most of the characteristics of the wise ones. My father, on the other hand, was a very caring man who had age, knowledge, and humility. He was, however, never strong on patience or calmness. I think of him as good, but not wise. I suspect that I am too much like my father to even aspire to wisdom, but I keep trying to get closer.

Many years ago, a colleague chose to post on the internet, a list that I don't assume he wrote himself. It is a collection of wise discernments from life that goes like this:

I've learned- that you cannot make someone love you. All you can do is be someone who can be loved. The rest is up to them.

I've learned-that no matter how much I care, some people just don't care back.

I've learned-that it takes years to build up trust, and only seconds to destroy it.

I've learned- that it's not what you have in your life, but who you have in your life that counts.

I've learned- that you can get by on charm for about fifteen minutes. After that, you'd better know something.

I've learned- that you can do something in an instant that will give you heartache for life.

I've learned-that it's taking me a long time to become the person I want to be.

I've learned- hat you should always leave loved ones with loving words. It may be the last time you see them.

I've learned- that you can keep going long after you can't.

I've learned- that we are responsible for what we do, no matter how we feel.

I've learned- that money is a lousy way of keeping score.

I've learned- that sometimes the people you expect to kick you when you're down will be the ones to help you get back up.

I've learned- that sometimes when I'm angry I have the right to be angry, but that doesn't give me the right to be cruel.

I've learned- that just because someone doesn't love you the way you want them to doesn't mean they don't love you with all they have.

I've learned-that maturity has more to do with what types of experiences you've had and what you've learned from them and less to do with how many birthdays you've celebrated.

I've learned-that it isn't always enough to be forgiven by others. Sometimes you have to learn to forgive yourself.

I've learned-that our background and circumstances may have influenced who we are, but we are responsible for who we become.

I've learned- That just because two people argue, it doesn't mean they don't love each other. And just because they don't argue, it doesn't mean they do.

I've learned-that two people can look at the exact same thing and see something totally different.

I've learned-that your life can be changed in a matter of hours by people who don't even know you.

I've learned- that even when you think you have no more to give, when a friend cries out to you, you will find the strength to help.

As I researched wisdom this week, I rediscovered something that I knew, but had forgotten: that much wisdom is transferred in stories, like the story of the pots. Permit me to share with you a couple more wise stories I discovered.

Daren Poke is responsible for this one:

There were once two rabbits, Wanda the Wise and Frederick the Foolish, who were walking through a field. They were good friends and enjoyed their strolls together. On this walk, they came upon two carrots. One of the carrots had large leaves sprouting out of the top and the other looked much smaller from the surface. Frederick was excited and ran up to the carrot with the larger leaves. "I'll have this one," he proudly exclaimed and proceeded to extract it from the ground. Wanda shrugged her shoulders and pulled out the other carrot, which turned out to be much bigger. Frederick was surprised and asked how this could possibly be. Wanda looked at her friend and replied, "You can't always judge a carrot by its leaves."

They kept on walking and came across another pair of carrots, again with differing sized leaves. This time Frederick allowed his friend the first pick. Wanda hopped to each carrot, inspected and sniffed them carefully and, to Frederick's surprise, chose the carrot with the larger leaves. As they each extracted their carrots from the ground, Frederick was bemused to see that his carrot was smaller than Wanda's. "I thought that you said that small leaves meant it would be a larger carrot." He said. "No," replied Wanda, "I said don't judge a carrot by its leaves. It's also important to remember to think before you choose." Frederick nodded and they ate their carrots before continuing their stroll.

For a third time, they found two carrots, again with different sized leaves. Frederick looked confused and didn't know what to do. Wanda indicated that he could choose which carrot to eat. The poor foolish rabbit, pretended to inspect each carrot, but he didn't really know what to do. He knew that he wasn't as smart as his friend and he looked to Wanda with a confused expression on his face. Wanda smiled warmly and hopped over to the carrots. She inspected them and pulled out one of the carrots. Frederick shrugged his shoulders and went to the other one before he was interrupted by his wise friend. "No Frederick, this one's your carrot," she said. "But you made the choice and I'm sure it's the bigger one of the two. I don't know how you do it, but I guess you're just smarter than me."

"Frederick, there's no point in having wisdom if you're not willing to share the benefits of it with others. You're my friend and I want you to have this carrot. A smart rabbit with a full stomach but no friends isn't really wise is she?" "I guess you're right," said Frederick with a full mouth, "As usual."

The author commented: *I wrote this story as a reminder that in our search for wisdom, we must also search for a way to assist those around us with what we've learned. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus once said, "Of all the things which wisdom provides to make life entirely happy, much the greatest is the possession of friendship." Be wise, share what you've learned with others and help make the world a better place for those around you.*

And then there is this one about two brothers:

Once upon a time, two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labour and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?" "Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor. In fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll go him one better. See that pile of lumber curing by the barn? I want you to build me a fence - an 8-foot fence - so I won't need to see his place anymore. Cool him down anyhow."

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you." The older brother had to go to town for supplies, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day.

The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, and nailing. About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge - a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work - handrails and all - and the neighbour, his younger brother, was coming across, his hand outstretched. "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hand.

They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother. "I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, " but I have many more bridges to build."

Everyday we have the choice of building fences or bridges. One leads to isolation and the other to openness.

You may know this wisdom story which originated with Loren Eiseley, but has been told by many others who do not always give him credit. This is Joel Barker's version, which does credit Eiseley.

There's a story I would like to share with you. It was inspired by the writing of Loren Eiseley. Eiseley was a very special person because he combined the best of two cultures. He was a scientist and a poet. And from those two perspectives he wrote insightfully and beautifully about the world and our role in it.

*Once upon a time, there was a wise man, much like Eiseley himself, who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach before he began his work. One day he was walking along the shore. As he looked down the beach, he saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself to think of someone who would dance to the day. So he began to walk faster to catch up. As he got closer, he saw that it was a young man and the young man wasn't dancing, but instead he was reaching down to the shore, picking up something and very gently throwing it into the ocean. As he got closer, he called out, "Good morning! What are you doing?" The young man paused, looked up and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean."
"I guess I should have asked, Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?"
"The sun is up and the tide is going out. And if I don't throw them in they'll die."
"But young man, don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it. You can't possibly make a difference!"
The young man listened politely. Then bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves. "It made a difference for that one!"
His response surprised the man. He was upset. He didn't know how to reply. So instead, he turned away and walked back to the cottage to begin his writings.
All day long as he wrote, the image of the young man haunted him. He tried to ignore it, but the vision persisted. Finally, late in the afternoon he realized that he the scientist, he the poet, had missed out on the essential nature of the young man's actions. Because he realized that what the young man was doing was choosing not to be an observer in the universe and make a difference. He was embarrassed.
That night he went to bed troubled. When the morning came he awoke knowing that he had to do something. So he got up, put on his clothes, went to the beach and found the young man. And with him he spent the rest of the morning throwing starfish into the ocean. You see, what that young man's actions represent is something that is special in each and everyone of us. We have all been gifted with the ability to make a difference. And if we can, like that young man, become aware of that gift, we gain through the strength of our vision the power to shape the future.
And, he concludes, that is your challenge. And that is my challenge. We must each find our starfish. And if we throw our stars wisely and well, I have no question that the 21st century is going to be a wonderful place.*

I toyed with concluding this service with our singing the song, "It's In Every One of Us to Be Wise," which comes from the movie "Big." After downloading the music, I realized that it goes too far. After asserting that it is in every one of us to be wise, it urges "Find your heart, open up both your eyes." OK, so far, but then it asserts "We can all know everything without ever knowing why, It's in every one of us by and by."

No, I don't believe "we can all know everything." We can all know more, we can all see more broadly, we can all grow in understanding, but part of wisdom is knowing that we cannot all know everything.

But, like the boy with the starfish, I do believe that we are challenged by the responsibility of trying to grow, of trying to gain wisdom, of doing what we can to increase the wisdom in the world. As Barker put it, "We have all been gifted with the ability to make a difference. And if we can, like that young man, become aware of that gift, we gain through the strength of our vision the power to shape the future."