



## Wisdom

*The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.*

Once upon a time, King Solomon had a devoted palace guard. This guard was a quiet, humble man, but one afternoon Solomon overheard him boasting that he could accomplish any task the king assigned to him. King Solomon decided to teach the guard a lesson, to set him an impossible task in order to humble him. "My heart yearns to own a magical ring," said the king. "Within six months time, bring me a ring that can make a happy person sad and a sad person happy."

The guard had never heard of such a ring, but he promised to dedicate himself to the task and set off immediately. First, the guard searched local marketplaces, but no merchant had heard of such a ring. He searched further afield, visiting port cities, stopping caravans of travelers. No one had a magical ring to sell.

The guard grew desperate. He loved and admired King Solomon and did not want to let him down. As the end of six months approached, the guard returned to the local market, where he met an old woman selling jewelry. "Do you have a magical ring that can make a happy person sad and a sad person happy," he asked? The old woman nodded, took the cheapest ring in her stall, and engraved four words on it.

The next day, the guard returned to the palace, where King Solomon was enjoying himself at a party. Laughing happily, King Solomon greeted the guard. But when the guard presented the ring, the king's smile faded. The ring was inscribed with the words "this too shall pass."

Looking at the ring, Solomon knew the grandeur that surrounded him would end. At the same time, he knew the ring could bring him comfort when he was struggling with grief. Removing an elaborate ruby ring from his finger and

offering it to the guard in apology, King Solomon placed his new magical ring on his finger, where for the rest of his life it offered him balance and wisdom.

This Jewish wisdom story is one of thousands. Folklore, parables, proverbs: every cultural tradition has stories designed to impart wisdom. The stories feature unexpected twists, bumbling fools, tricksters. Wisdom tales subvert expectations. These stories remind us that wisdom is not solely about facts or knowledge, but about deeper meanings, about learning through the full range of human experience — laughter, confusion, even anger.

Modern Confucian philosopher Tu Wei-Ming teaches that "learning to be fully human is to learn to become a sage." In other words, to be wise is to be genuinely human. For Wei-Ming, this means that "the aim of self-transformation is not to go beyond humanity but to realize it as completely as possible." When we live into our authentic selves, including our flaws and faults, we learn what it is to be wise. What Wei-Ming calls "intellectual sophistry and metaphysical speculation" hide the path to wisdom.

This anti-intellectual strain runs through teachings on wisdom, whether Confucian thought or wisdom tales. Even Unitarians recommend this approach. In 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "if we will take the good we find, asking no questions, we shall have heaping measures. The great gifts are not got by analysis." (Ask no questions! Are we *sure* Emerson was a Unitarian?) Although many of us will remain rightfully hesitate to throw out our favorite books, wisdom depends on paying attention, on accepting our daily bounty, on practicing the art of *being*.

In many traditions, one becomes wise only within community. There can be no self-transformation, no earned

wisdom, without working together and listening to the stories of those around us. Poet Denise Levertov suggests that wisdom comes only when we open ourselves to the needs and concerns of other people. She writes that "Just when you seem to yourself/nothing but a flimsy web/of questions, you are given/the questions of others to hold. ... You are given the questions of others/ as if they were answers/to all you ask."

Is wisdom part of the divine? The great Catholic theologian Thomas Merton conceptualized wisdom as *Hagia Sophia*, a mothering force, "an invisible fecundity ... a hidden wholeness" that exists "beyond the reach of anything our eyes can see or our minds can understand." This holy wisdom lives in us and speaks through us, a holistic force steeped in humility and wonder rather than knowledge and facts, helping us let go of little judgements and pulling us always toward love.

Maybe this force is our soul's own magical ring of wisdom. What would be inscribed on yours?

*From Hallman Ministerial Intern  
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### Wisdom Theme Resources

#### BOOKS

*Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison (1977)

*Heart Sutra*, Translation and commentary by Red Pine (2005)

*Holy Envy* by Barbara Brown Taylor (2019)

#### MOVIES

*The Mustang* (2019)