

WISDOM, THE LURE AND IMPROBABILITY OF ----- ELLIOTT #1771

It's natural, as one ages, to want to appear/be wise. But it's wise to realize how elusive wisdom is. I remember, toward the end of the 1920s, that the movie organ was used less and less: "the talkies" were coming in. My parents were crazy about Louise Brooks, star of the silents, who somewhere along her trajectory dropped this bit of stardust as her epitaph (11Nov79 OBSERVER magazine): "I never gave anything away without wishing I had kept it; nor kept it without wishing I had given it away." At the end of her life she was able to accept the fact that she'd been a bungler, not a wise woman. Say I, that acceptance + admission was her wisdom. "I never" acknowledges, and praises, a transcendent possibility she'd not achieved-fulfilled. Because I perceive a human being as a forever-yearning energy within a skinbag, I render her "never" as "not yet." The skill and art of living, for those who yearn with humility and love, bear their best fruit in the future. That is my belief, for I consider it more probably wise than the alternatives.

1. Sort out, from those you've been with, those you think wise--or at least did at the time. I was with Eisenhower, did not think him wise--but do now. I was with JFK, did not think him wise, and still don't. I was with Helen Keller, Schweitzer, Einstein, and many representatives of Jesus whom I thought wise, and still do. I was with Lindbergh in 1927 when he returned from the "We" flight, and I still don't know whether I'd call him wise....Wisdom, and attributing wisdom, is elusive. Two improbabilities: (1) That a human being will be wise; (1) That I will correctly sort out the wise from the foolish.

2. A Bunyan character is "Mr. Worldly-Wise," who can be counted on to watch out for number one--first, or only. He's greedy for power and despises failure--which means he despises almost everybody almost all of the time--to which same fact Mr. Heavenly-Wise makes another response, viz., fellow-feeling (compassion, as this from the great science teacher Jacob Bronowski): "The world is made of people who never quite get into the first team and who just miss the prizes at the flower show." Me, I despise any so-called wisdom that is without this. Wisdom includes the power and practice of imagining the other's feelings, then doing what is best for the other as though for oneself.

3. Wisdom is life lived in humble gratitude: "What hast thou that thou has not received?" Author Gerald Brenan: "When I write a page that reads badly I know that it is myself who has written it. When it reads well it has come through from somewhere else."

4. Wisdom orchestrates human/nonhuman powers to create. Bronowski again: Among the creatures, we are unique in our "jigsaw of faculties....Every animal leaves traces of what it was; man alone leaves traces of what he created." When we use our powers to help each other become truly human, we are co-creators with God and therefore wise--whether or not we individually leave anything for archeologists to find.

5. Wisdom has the courage to ask dumb questions--as Bertolt Brecht: "What happens to the hole when the cheese is gone?" Sense-making can progress only by the discovery that some old sense is nonsense (which takes intellectual courage), and then saying so (which takes moral-social courage). Pathmakers are only heightenings, here, of our common human task.

6. Wisdom delights in balance, as of old/new: "The ear...craves the familiar and is shocked by the unexpected: the eye tends to be impatient, craves the novel and is bored by repetition" (W.H.Auden). Wisdom is at the intersection of habit/adventure and earthy/heavenly.