This chapter introduces the volume and provides an overview of the literature on the nature of wisdom and the wisdom of nature as weaving webs of connection and embracing paradox that can offer insight to current trends in adult education.

The Wisdom of Webs A-Weaving: Adult Education and the Paradoxes of Complexity in Changing Times

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Nature seems to have its own wisdom. The world turns, the sun rises and sets every day, and seasons change in reliable mystery as life unfolds in a series of spiraling cycles. Most of the time we pay no attention to these earthly rhythms and are just caught up in the tasks of daily life. But occasionally, something catches us off guard, like the mysterious weavings of a yellow garden spider, and we find ourselves agog contemplating the wonder of nature and what such “nature wisdom” might teach us for daily living, or even for our work with adult learners.

A couple of years ago, upon returning home from a summer away to begin again one of those similar but not so mysterious cycles—that of academic life—I unlocked my back door, only to observe the glorious webbed handiwork of one of these garden spider beauties connecting the branches of the rosebush outside my sunroom window. In the middle, there she was, huge and yellow, guarding the web of her own home and the sunroom window of mine. At first, I was afraid of her in all her big-fuzziness; but then learned she was harmless to humans and very beneficial to gardens. She became “Charlotte,” and over the next couple of weeks, Charlotte and her handiwork, which glistened like stained glass in the summer sun, became part of my daily observation. If anything came near or touched her web, she would oscillate the entire lattice, sometimes catching something for dinner. Any damage and Charlotte would busily make repairs; she’d respin, reweave, and reconnect. And so it went over the next several days—until alas—one day at summer’s end, Charlotte was nowhere to be found. Likely
she had laid her eggs and died, as the very next year, when I returned for a new cycle of academic life, there was another yellow garden spider in the middle of a finely spun orb outside my sunroom window—perhaps Charlotte’s daughter! And so began a new cycle of study, not only of the spinning and spawning of yellow garden spiders, but of the cyclic webs of nature that offer both scientific and metaphorical explanations about the interconnection of all things. Such was one of many lessons in lifelong learning, all through the web weaving of yellow garden spiders!

What has this to do with adult education and with wisdom? Wisdom indeed is difficult to define. It is associated with age and experience (Erikson and Erikson, 1997), yet it is not limited to either of these. There is also an integrative quality to wisdom, a sense of weaving together many (sometimes disparate) threads into a new coherent whole. Hall (2010) highlights the paradoxical dimension of wisdom and observes: “It is rooted in character, personal history, and the experience of human nature, yet it is bigger than any one individual. It exists as both edifice and fog, is both immortal yet fleeting . . .” (p. 23). Such is the elusive nature of wisdom. But there is also the wisdom of nature that we so often miss. Yet it is ever present in its ability to rejuvenate itself, for as complexity scientist Frijtof Capra (1996) notes, living systems—whether individual cells, entire human bodies, or fields of study—survive by creating new patterns of connection: They repair, reorganize, and reweave new connecting threads in the web of life, just as garden spiders do as part of their innate wisdom. Thus, the wisdom of nature might offer us some insight into the paradoxical and ever elusive nature of wisdom.

Surprisingly, there has been only limited consideration of wisdom in the field of adult education (Jarvis, 2001; Bassett, 2005), though Merriam, Caffaralla, and Baumgartner (2007) synthesized some of it in relation to adult development drawing from cognitive psychology. There is a developing discussion of wisdom, however, in the wider education discourses (Sternberg and Jordan, 2005). In this era of globalization and academic downsizing, it is perhaps useful to consider what it might mean to educate adults for wisdom and to attend to it in our daily lives as lifelong learners. Adult education is an interdisciplinary field; it is ripe for weaving new patterns of connection not only among ourselves but also with numerous fields of study, from science to religion and beyond. I am hoping that we can do so with wisdom. As daunting as it is to edit a volume on wisdom and adult education, I’ll begin by providing an overview of the literature on wisdom itself and then consider what some of its insights might suggest for dealing with a few current challenges facing the field of adult education; some chapter authors do so with greater specificity. This chapter is grounded in two basic assumptions: that there is an integration quality to wisdom that attends to the hidden wholeness and interconnectedness of everything in the universe; and that wisdom is based on the type of knowledge that makes these web-like connections more visible in creative ways.
The Nature of Wisdom: An Overview

There is a body of literature that tries to attempt to define the ever-elusive nature of wisdom, much of it referring to insights from many of the world’s great religions and indigenous cultures (Smith, 1991; Schussler Fiorenza, 2001); indeed, questions of how to live in a way that makes life meaningful have been with us since humans appeared on Earth and are thus the subject of most of the world’s religions. There are also numerous references to wisdom in the professional literature in medicine, management, and education that focus on how practitioners can apply practical knowledge in artful ways (Sternberg, 2003; Bassett, 2005). Several authors in this volume discuss the overall literature and research outlining the nature of wisdom; here, as I have also done elsewhere (Tisdell, 2011), I summarize the main themes.

Forms of Wisdom: The Transcendent and the Practical. Wisdom as it connects to knowledge has been the subject of both philosophy and religion; indeed, the very root of the word “philosophy” means “love of wisdom.” Often cited in discussions are the Aristotelian distinctions among its types—primarily between Sophia, as transcendent wisdom, and phronesis, as practical wisdom; occasionally, episteme, as theoretical or scientific wisdom, is mentioned as well (Osbeck and Robinson, 2005). A common reference in discussions of Sophia (as spiritual or transcendent wisdom) is from Proverbs 24 of the Hebrew Bible, where Wisdom is building her house and carving out seven pillars.

Authors who discuss wisdom also often recount the story of Socrates, who was seen by his contemporaries as having knowledge and wisdom but who denied being knowledgeable or wise. Hence, humility is deemed a characteristic of wisdom. This tension of wisdom as having knowledge, but recognizing that at the same time one does not have knowledge, since all knowledge is partial, connects wisdom (in the Sophia sense) to the notion of paradox. Goldberg (2005) discusses the “paradox of wisdom” (the paradox being that the “older” brain becomes more wise) from a neuroscience perspective (discussed further by Swartz, this volume), arguing that adults who age well make decisions based more on pattern recognition as a result of the complex neural patterns that develop over time. Such patterns allow for drawing on multiple parts of the brain at the same time, resulting in wiser ways of being in the world. In essence, Goldberg examines wisdom from a scientific perspective. Others look at wisdom as integration; Palmer (2004), for example, encourages people to pay attention to the hidden wholeness within. Many authors also discuss how to cultivate wisdom, either in the phronesis sense of practical wisdom (discussed further by Bassett, this volume) or in the Sophia sense of the metaphysical which has implications for adult education (discussed by Fraser and Hyland-Russell, this volume). But across all of these discussions, there is an integration quality to wisdom that allows people to negotiate opposites in creative ways that lead to more integrative thinking and an ability to deal with paradox.
These notions of wisdom—Sophia as transcendental or the highest form of knowledge and phronesis as practical knowledge—cannot be separated, as one often leads to the other, as part of the interconnecting web of wisdom of the universe itself. As Yang (this volume) notes, the wisdom embraced by a culture or religion (in its most positive sense) offers insights for practically how to live a “good life.” In his recent memoir, world religions scholar Huston Smith (2010) highlights what he learned not only from scholarly work, but also from embracing practices from the world’s religions to experience their wisdom. He highlights how they related to his ability to access wonder—from the chants of Hinduism, to Buddhist meditations on the present moment, to the dances of the Sufis, the mysteries of the Tao, and on meditations out of the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition. As he notes, “Most mystics don’t want to read religious wisdom: they want to be it. A postcard of a beautiful lake is not a beautiful lake,” and then explains: “What drew me to the Sufis was in fact their dancing, how they pray not merely with their minds but with their bodies” (p. 147). Indeed, wisdom is not simply of the mind; it is also embodied in music, dance, and meditation (discussed further by Sussman and Kossak, this volume). Interestingly, as many neuroscientists have recently noted (e.g., Siegel, 2010), meditation and embodied practices change the structure of the brain as it weaves new neural patterns of connection, just as spiders do as they reweave their webs.

To be clear, Smith is in no way suggesting that embracing meditation and other embodied practices as a way of accessing wisdom means completely suspending the rational mind; indeed, critical thinking and having content knowledge as competence to act in the world is part of the way of practical wisdom, and exercising judgment. As many scholars note, embodied spiritual practices, along with rational critical thought, should inspire people and lead to wise action to promote equity and justice in the world (Schussler Fiorenza, 2001), a point Okpalaoka and Dillard (this volume) also discuss. But human beings are not likely to be inspired by academic knowledge alone, which is distinct from wisdom. As Patricia Hill Collins (1990) points out, “In the context of race, gender, and class oppression, the distinction is essential. Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (p. 208). The point then is to embrace the paradox of both action and nonaction (stillness in the present moment), both rationality and nonrationality, and to be opened to greater wisdom as a result for action in the world.

**Wisdom, Education, and Adult Development.** There is a growing discussion in recent years about educating for wisdom and attending to how it develops. Sternberg and Jordan (2005) in their edited collection focus on wisdom largely from a cognitive psychology perspective (more in the phronesis than the Sophia sense) in regard to cross-cultural theories of wisdom, its development across the lifespan, and its presence in practice in workplaces.
Contributors to Ferrari and Potworowski's (2008) anthology focus more specifically on cross-cultural perspectives on teaching for wisdom.

In many publications and edited collections (Young-Eisendrath and Miller, 2000; Mijares, 2003), authors consider wisdom from a developmental psychology perspective drawing on the work of Erik Erikson (who saw wisdom as a desired end state of development) and discuss it in relation to maturity and/or spirituality. In a similar vein, drawing on her husband’s work as well as her own as an artist, Joan Erikson (1991) weaves together the connection among wisdom, creativity, and sensory experience. She highlights several qualities of wisdom, including interdependence, resilience, empathy, humor, and humility, as well as artistic practices that help facilitate identity development and wisdom as well as help negotiate the paradoxes of living. In particular, she contemplates the paradox of the wise fool, and what it means to embrace dialectics to deal with life’s limitations. Being pulled open beyond the limitations of such polarities as rational/affective, action/stillness, male/female by embracing both sides of the dialectic is a hallmark of wisdom, she argues, and has implications for how we continue to live in the world. Daloz (this volume) explores what this might mean for mentoring men’s ongoing development toward wisdom.

There have been several research studies on wisdom, how it develops, and what it suggests for wise practice. The contributors to this volume summarize these and offer insights on what wisdom means for them in various adult education venues, while Jarvis, in the closing chapter, discusses what it suggests for further directions in lifelong learning, though he notes the distinction between learning about wisdom and being wise. In the remainder of this chapter, I offer some thoughts on what the literature on wisdom might suggest in light of some current issues in the field.

**Adult Education and Wisdom**

In thinking about wisdom in relation to the field of adult education, it is helpful to consider its current academic landscape in order to begin to vision the future, hopefully with greater wisdom. While I’ve discussed much of this elsewhere (see Tisdell, 2011), I do so here in greater detail.

**Recent Trends and Current Issues.** Like any field of study, recent publications tell us something about its current emphases. In the past 10 years there has been much discussion on different theoretical perspectives on adult education, such as on how one’s social location affects teaching and learning from various critical, feminist, race-centered, postmodern, or other sociocultural perspectives. This has resulted in numerous journal publications, as well as the new *Handbook of Race and Adult Education* (edited by Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, and Brookfield, 2010), which gives an in-depth look at issues of race and ethnicity. Merriam and Grace (2011) have put together a collection on contemporary issues in the field,
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and of course the recent *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon, 2010) that focuses on the centrality of adult learning in various contexts of practice tell us something of important current issues in the field. Further, the increasing attention to how factors such as emotions, spirituality, the arts, popular culture, and the body relate to adult development and learning offer new insight about how to teach and learn more holistically, which can relate to the interconnecting web that may lead to educating with greater wisdom.

Recent publications do tell us something of the current issues in the field; yet it is more often at conferences that one gets more of a *feeling* for what is really hot for the people in a field—what people’s passions and concerns are. The flash in their eyes or excitement in their voices when presenting their scholarship is a much greater indicator of what generates life for them than can ever come alive in the flatness of a printed page. People’s frustrations also become apparent, sometimes coming out in sarcastic remarks or in rolling eyes at general sessions, or in less formal conversations among close colleagues. In my own experience in these gatherings at conferences over the past 20 years (which indicates that I have experience, but not necessarily wisdom!) it is clear there are many positive things happening. But there are a few challenges or tendencies of concern that I have observed or heard articulated, likely reflective of larger issues in academia (also discussed elsewhere, Tisdell, 2011), namely: about the decline of academic adult education positions; that academia is big on critique of positions, and sometimes shorter on solution and inspiration; that there tends to be an emphasis on difference and division than on what integrates or unites. How might we deal with some of these issues with greater wisdom?

**Embracing Paradox, the Nature of Wisdom, and the Wisdom of Nature.** The literature outlining the nature of wisdom suggests that part of the solution might lie in the notion of paradox: that embracing the tension of the opposite and engaging the dialectic perhaps pulls us open to greater creativity and wisdom. Indeed, many of the authors cited here have referred to the apparent paradoxes of wisdom, such as: The more that one knows, one realizes the limits of one’s knowledge; within scarcity, there is abundance; to lose oneself is to find oneself. Paradoxically, losing our identity as a field may also be a way to find it anew; this fits well with the notion of emergence that arises out of complexity science.

Most of the literature outlining the *nature of wisdom* ignores the *wisdom of nature*. But complexity scientists emphasize the patterns of connection within nature and the ways that living systems self-organize to adapt and survive; they marvel at the wonder and *wisdom of nature* in some of its aspects, of the mystery of the swarm of ants or locusts (Fisher, 2009; Mitchell, 2009)—of the limited intelligence of a single ant but of the “super intelligence” of huge ant colonies that constantly reorganize to ensure their survival. Perhaps this is instinct, not wisdom. But contemplation of these
patterns of nature can lead to its own wisdom. Further, complexity scientists suggest that these emergent and new patterns of connection offer insights for human reorganization, which may have implications for adult education in changing times.

There are certainly concerns about funding, the closing of graduate degree programs in adult education, and the lack of replacement for faculty who retire or leave an institution, or the “reorganization” of adult education via absorption into other departments. But if the old adage that a crisis is both a danger and an opportunity is true, it might behoove us to think about the “opportunities” before us in these times of scarce resources and “reorganization,” and to consider some of the thinking from complexity science (Capra, 1996)—that living systems self-organize to create new patterns of connection. While one can indeed be marginalized at the beginning in reorganized departments, there are also great opportunities for collaboration. The more we collaborate with others in professional fields, such as medicine, health care, or business (disciplines in which there is more emphasis on curricular content than on pedagogy), the more we have the opportunity to really influence the education of adults in multiple disciplines and settings. There is also typically more grant funding available in such content-driven fields, and collaborating with colleagues can lead to further creative thinking and webs of connection.

Secondly, the fact that we are a field that encourages critique of positions is indeed a strength; it is important to rationally consider the strengths and weaknesses of a particular position and make apparent its theoretical underpinnings or assumptions. Nevertheless, too often critique as it is practiced tears apart a particular position highlighting only what is wrong with it. While sharp and focused critical thinking grounded in rationality is absolutely necessary, and requires analysis of the parts, rationality alone is not a substitute for wisdom, nor will it inspire people toward hope that sustains efforts toward the creation of something new, as the research on transformative learning tells us. Rather, change and creativity are born of experience of the whole and the integration of the parts in new-woven patterns of connection. It doesn’t come only from rational critique. It also comes from weaving new and more complex patterns of neuro-firing among various parts of the learning brain to express what generates life and creativity such as the way art, music, dance, or poetic expression does. Thus, I believe we also need to focus on what is good about a position as well as what is weak about it, and to provide examples of inspiration in the very positions we critique. This can happen not only through logical academic presentation, but also through creative expression. This is part of living the dialectic; it does not mean giving up rational critique. It is simply part of embracing the tension of opposites. Thus, perhaps wisdom might suggest adopting a new mantra: “Critique, but create!”

The third concern, that we tend to focus more on what separates than what integrates, is probably borne of the other two: particularly the emphasis
on rational critique that requires separating out positions into parts or categories. We often focus on what separates us from other related fields (such as human resource development), or what separates us into groups of people by culture, gender, or race. It is extremely important to examine the differences in underlying theoretical perspectives among different and related disciplines and to do research on the needs of specific groups of learners based on social location. Indeed, we are not simply generic people with exactly the same learning needs. Nevertheless, there tends to be a lack of consideration of what is also common among us, across disciplines or social location. This is perhaps where we can take a cue from complexity science. As Capra (1996) suggests in his discussion of the web of life, surviving, adapting, and thriving in the great web of life is borne of weaving new webs of connection to create a unique whole. It is what allows an organism to thrive, perhaps all part of being mindful of the hidden wholeness within.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is literature both on the nature of wisdom and the wisdom of nature. But literature only tells us what something is *about*; wisdom comes about from wise living through embracing tensions of opposites, as well as wonder, mystery, and complexity. Wisdom involves both head knowledge and soul knowledge; it is what helps us weave together connections within our own being, and in human relations with others as individuals and across gender, culture, race, and religious differences and academic disciplines to facilitate wise action. It is about embracing paradox and dialectics that potentially pulls us open to something new—and to our very creativity. It is not borne of rationality *alone*, nor of meditation *alone* (or other practices of creative expression that get us into an altered state of consciousness). Rather, it is borne of an integration of these multiple ways of knowing, which allows us to both critique and create as we engage (hopefully) in wise action in the world. I have great hopes for the field of adult education as we forge together our future by embracing paradox with its both/and thinking. May we draw on the wisdom of Sophia, the critique and practical know-how or *phronesis* that our field is known for, as well as the humility of Socrates! We can take our cue, not only by reflecting on the nature of wisdom, but also by observing the wisdom of nature. Indeed, perhaps we'll discover new ways to both critique and create, with mystery, passion, and wonder along the way—not only at yellow garden spiders weaving their mysterious webs, but at the ways that adult educators are also weaving new webs of connections leading to further emergence. The chapter authors in this volume tell us something of how they are thinking about wisdom. Hopefully, it will spawn ways to further weave the web of adult education in a unique pattern that emerges in greater wisdom.
References


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