

Unconventional Ambition

I Kings 3:5-12

A couple of surveys over the past year tell us something about the ambitions of the Millennial Generation—those born between 1980 and 2000. One survey of roughly 2000 young adults inquired about their top ten life ambitions.¹ The other was conducted by Goldman Sachs on the consumption behavior of those from their teens to their mid-thirties.²

In the Goldman Sachs survey, researchers concluded that this generation is “less career ambitious” than previous cohorts.

Citing data from MonitoringTheFuture.org, the report shows that today’s high schoolers expect their lives to revolve less around work and more around vacation time than Gen-Xers—the generation born between the early 1960s and 1980s.

The report also noted that for the currently employed, those in their 20s and 30s

make less money relative to the rest of the population than ever before, are more conscious of the value of the products they buy and are more likely to be living with their parents.

Some of this may be related to the Great Recession we just came through, but it also could indicate Millennials are less driven to achieve “the American Dream” compared to their elders. They want the dream, but are less willing to sacrifice everything to achieve it. This isn’t due to a lack of motivation, as the other survey makes clear in listing their top ten ambitions (along with the age those surveyed believed they would fulfill them):

¹ “What’s Your Top Life Ambition?”, *The Telegraph*, September 12, 2013.

² Saranya Kapur, “Today’s Young People Aren’t Ambitious, Care Less About Their Jobs, And Want More Vacation,” *Business Insider*, September 25, 2013.

For Men:

1. Be financially secure (age 41)
 2. Have a family (30)
3. Have a successful career (33)
4. Travel around the world (42)
 5. Get married (29)
 6. Own a dream house (39)
 7. Live abroad (39)
8. Do something selfless (35)
9. Learn another language (33)
10. Start your own company (36)

For Women:

1. Be financially secure (age 39)
 2. Have a family (28)
 3. Get married (27)
4. Travel around the world (42)
 5. Own a dream house (38)
6. Have a successful career (31)
7. Do something selfless (33)
 8. Own a pet (25)
9. Learn another language (31)
 10. Live abroad (38)

Seventy percent of those surveyed recognized that they could only fulfill their ambitions through hard work and saving money, but again they're less willing to make as many sacrifices for their career compared to previous generations. Fortunately, Wendy and I can say

all four of our daughters have done quite well in fulfilling their ambitions, as well as ours, i.e., not having them live with us!

In spite of these differences researchers identify between generations, many of the ambitions cited are fairly conventional and typical of what we'd expect people to aspire to. Who doesn't seek financial security (however that might be defined), especially in this culture? Money matters. Or what about having a nice house, or traveling, or starting your own business—most people share those ambitions. And, of course, it's common to want a family of one's own making—it might not be everyone's desire, but we're doing a pretty good job of overpopulating the earth, so it's on somebody's bucket list! The point is, the Millennial Generation is fairly normal in what they seek; they are as conventional about their goals, objectives, and ambitions as the rest of us. The main difference is, when you're young, you're absolutely convinced your priorities are far better than your parents!

It's interesting for me now looking back on my own ambitions as a young man. Some of what I aspired to I never achieved, and some of the things I need now, I never aspired to. For instance, I wish I had wanted to become at least bilingual, if not multilingual, able to speak several languages fluently. That would be an asset to me now. I get frustrated in international circles being limited to English, which is a real handicap when I've got acquaintances and friends all around the planet and could have many more if my language skills were better. Yet, back at the age when my brain was still pliable, I thought it was pointless to learn a language except for

getting into college. So a minimal effort brought about a minimal result and limits me to this day. If I had only known...

My regret illustrates one of the things few of us would have ever thought was important at an early age, i.e., gaining wisdom. We might seek many things when we're young, but wisdom typically isn't one of them! As a result, lacking the perspective of both time and experience, some of the choices and priorities of youth and young adulthood come back in the form of regrets later in life. By midlife, most people have list of "do-overs" if they could rewind the clock and reinvent the moments of the past. The benefits of wisdom and perspective come into play once they discover that things don't always work out as planned, or that a smarter choice earlier would have made things easier for them in the long run, or had they erred on the side of caution, the consequences of the risks taken in youth wouldn't complicate life so much years later.

Wisdom usually comes with age, as it takes the perspective of experience and observation, of trial and error, of successes and failures, to guide us toward the right choices and decisions. Wisdom allows us to act when we should and not, when we shouldn't; it empowers us to say the right thing when it's called for and to be a stable presence in the midst of life's turmoil. It helps us discern truth and reality which get hidden behind the deceptions of youthful desire and lust.

Wisdom is realistic and practical; sagacious people use their experience and intelligence to help them figure out the best solutions to each situation—their judgments are not stubbornly dictated by principles alone or overly influenced by what others want to see or

hear. They are information-gatherers who observe and connect the dots they see trending, forecasting a likely result should the trend continue. Those who are wise help guide others based on their broad perspective—advice which is usually correct and well worth following.

In these strident times, wisdom is lacking in many circles of leadership. In a crisis, wise people know how to keep the boat afloat; while pessimists worry about the winds battering the boat and optimists wait for the weather to change, those who are wise simply adjust the sails so they can move forward.

Confucius, one of the great sages of history, explained how wisdom arises:

By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is the noblest; second, by imitation, which is the easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

Socrates saw it this way: “Wisdom begins in wonder.”

In a similar way, the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Bible bases human wisdom largely on insights derived from God. God alone has the proper perspective to help with making good judgments. The great ambition of the teachers in both the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, as well as the Talmud and other sacred writings, was for people to seek wisdom from God, to value it, to learn from it, and to abide by it.

My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding...the you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; ...guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones. (Proverbs 2:1,2,6,8)

Of the many great sages of Hebrew literature, the name most closely associated with wisdom was Solomon, who was revered for

possessing divine-like insight. Our story this morning from I Kings helps to explain the reason for his legendary leadership.

The text has a context, of course, which was the transition from King David to his successor. Tradition would have suggested that the oldest living son, Adonijah, would ascend the throne, and it's clear in the opening chapter of I Kings that both Adonijah and the top leaders (including the commander of the army and the high priest) anticipated this to be the case. But that wouldn't actually occur, despite their plans and protocol—much like David himself arose to power out of unforeseen and unlikely circumstances. Instead, David decided to name a younger son, Solomon, to succeed him—a controversial choice, not only for his lower place in the family pecking order, but also because he was the son of Bathsheba who, at the time, was the wife of Uriah—a soldier in David's army, whom David had killed in an effort to cover up his illicit tryst with Bathsheba. Solomon, if anything, represented David's moral sins and shame, and then Solomon committed a few of his own, such as having his older brother, Adonijah, murdered once he (Solomon) ascended to power. So, like in politics and passion, King David's personal choices made things rather messy and complicated. If you examine the first couple chapters of I Kings leading up to our text, it reads like a storyline out of the TV drama, "Scandal."

So, as I said, this text has a context. Solomon was not the paragon of virtue from the start, which indicated his dearth of wisdom. With him ascending to the throne in this way, Solomon then sought God's blessing and help. After the proper platitudes of how faithful the Lord was to his father and how David followed the Lord's

merciful ways in righteous living (*NOT!*), Solomon searched for divine approval and support. It goes to show that even a blind squirrel will occasionally find an acorn, because Solomon made an honorable request:

Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?

To me, it seems as if this story makes God out to be an easy mark; nevertheless, the Lord commended Solomon for choosing wisdom, discernment, and good judgment as his ambition, instead of aspiring for the usual spoils of power—a long life, riches, and the death of his enemies—that had been expected from him. I suppose we can grant him that, since for this monarchy it was a remarkably humble and noble request, with Solomon acknowledging his own childlike lack of perspective, even though he was well into adulthood. His request, his desire, was an unconventional ambition, to be sure, but through his humble appeal, one that came to be fulfilled in the legacy of his leadership. Even to this day, to be considered as wise as Solomon is still a flattering compliment.

Perhaps that is why most of the Wisdom Literature in the Bible is credited to Solomon, whether or not he was the source. Wisdom that has a word of counsel for anyone in the course of life is valuable and cherished. The ability to judge correctly, to weigh matters soberly and fairly, to perceive the underlying agendas of those advocating for one side or another is truly a gift—one that we hope all of our judges and elected leaders possess, but also one that we hope our children and our children's children aspire to and acquire at some point in life. If we all pursued wisdom from an early age, it wouldn't

be the unconventional ambition that it is and what a difference it might make in the living of our lives and the governing of our world!

Let me close with some sayings of the wise:

The man who views the world at fifty the same as he did at twenty has wasted thirty years of his life.

--Muhammad Ali

Every person is a damn fool for at least five minutes every day. Wisdom consists in not exceeding the limit.

--Elbert Hubbard

The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.

--William Shakespeare

Who is wise? He that learns from everyone.

--Benjamin Franklin

Wisdom is not to be obtained from textbooks, but must be coined out of human experience in the flame of life.

--Morris Raphael Cohen

The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.

--William James

If one is too lazy to think, too vain to do a thing badly, too cowardly to admit it, one will never attain wisdom.

--Cyril Connolly

A man doesn't begin to attain wisdom until he recognizes that he is no longer indispensable.

--Admiral Byrd

Seven characteristics distinguish the wise: he does not speak in the presence of one wiser than himself; does not interrupt, is not hasty to answer, asks and answers the point, talks about first things first and about last things last, admits when she does not know, and acknowledges the truth.

--Talmud

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

--Psalm 90

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27 July 2014