WISDOM AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON: 
AN INQUIRY OF WISE ACTS AND WISE PRACTICES

by

Connie E. Taylor

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

September, 2015

Copyright © Connie E. Taylor, 2015
Dedication

Life Dreams

And so it seems that all my dreams come tumbling in the quiet; 
And yet I rarely allow the quiet.
Full up with life, full up with daily noise, my dreams elude me.

The holy finds no place to settle in the buzz.

The blue sky, the brown dirt, the gray stones have no place to nestle within my inner eye.
The sounds of the rustling leaves, the cricket, the thud of the acorn as it hits the soft dirt can find no home in my inner ear.
The wafting of ripe strawberries, the pines, the cut grass are unable to entice a deep breath in.
The splintering wooden table, the smoothness of the paper, the intrusion of the metal pen between my fingers, all indistinguishably lost in the muddle.

Only in the quiet, only in the stillness can the holy set forth an explosion of awareness, attention to beauty, distinction of detail, the tumbling forth of my dreams.

This dissertation is dedicated with much fondness and appreciation to this study’s eight participants who gave so willingly of their time and shared with the community their lived experiences and understandings of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom through this research process. I will be forever grateful for their many teachings and their awakening me to the potential of quiet.

Connie Taylor
Abstract

This phenomenological inquiry of wise acts and wise practices presents a perspective of wisdom as a social phenomenon. Wisdom is shown to emerge out of unique human interactions in particular contexts between wise-act-catalysts and receptive witnesses. This is a shift from the traditional perspective of wisdom as a person-centered internal manifestation. Rather, this study recognizes wisdom as externally manifested; co-created between individuals.

An adapted six-step approach is employed for this research inquiry that pushes the boundaries of a typical phenomenological study. Data were collected through themed group discussion sessions. Eight Canadian wise individuals aged 62-93 years of age, nominated for their history of wise action, participated in six group discussion sessions that lasted 2-2.5 hours each session. These same participants were individually interviewed twice, pre- and post- the group discussion sessions, for approximately 90 minutes each interview. In total, each participant devoted approximately 20 hours of his or her time to this research process. The collected data include the in-depth and transcribed audio files from the interviews and themed group discussion sessions but also writing pieces and drawing exercises submitted by the wise nominees. As a result, the collected data are extensive allowing for a deep understanding of the participants’ lived experiences and perspectives regarding their wise acts, wise practices, and how these relate to wisdom.

Patterns of “Self” and “Self-in-Relation-to-Other” emerged through the data analysis. Each pattern encompasses multiple themes that evolved from the recounted
words of the participants. The voice of each participant is distinctly identifiable throughout the study and each participant’s voice powerfully contributes to the study’s view of wisdom’s social nature.

The study closes with recommendations for future research, implications for practical ways these findings can be integrated into one’s everyday life, and poignant words from the study’s wise nominees.
Acknowledgements

A favourite poem of mine, written by Rainer Maria Rilke opens with this line, “I live my life in widening circles.” I feel that is how my life is playing out. I am living my life within an ever expanding circle of people. My family is ever growing, my number of friends is increasing, and I am fortunate enough to continue to include entire new communities of acquaintances and colleagues into my ever widening circle of people. My life is fuelled and fulfilled by the multiplicity of these relationships. The support, love, and challenges from the people in my life have brought me to this point and through the completion of this dissertation. I extend my heartfelt thanks to all those who have walked this portion of my life journey with me. I am grateful for their knowledge, their support, their love, and their patience with me. Together we have produced this document.

I am grateful to my family of origin for their life-long love and support; my mother, Elsie Taylor, my sister, Shirley Taylor, and my brother, Warren Taylor.

For the continuous joy my children and grandchildren bring into my life and their making it possible for me to carry on when the going has gotten tough, I am forever thankful. I extend my love and gratitude to: my daughter, Celyn Church; my daughter, Alanna Church, and her husband, Jeremi Mountjoy, along with their three children Oliver, Beatrix, and Alice; and my step-son, Brian Church, and his wife, Karen Church, along with their two children, Alysha and Eric.

I have a fabulous group of long-term women friends who have made every effort to support me through this journey, listened endlessly to my tails of success and my whining, and kept me grounded in reality. I appreciate your kindness and unwavering
support: Sue McLeod, Gayle Axford, Lynda Tervit, Dianne Lister, Bev Thomason, and Elaine Bryans. To my other myriad of friends who have stayed in touch and been waiting patiently for me to rejoin the real world, I am grateful for your spirit that has traveled this road with me.

I walked through the doors of Queen’s Faculty of Education in the summer of 2008. I completed my Master’s degree in 2010 but did not leave the building. I stayed on to continue my process of learning and research on wisdom through the Faculty of Education’s doctorate program. This community of knowledgeable professionals and student colleagues has become a large part of my life over the past seven years. My peers, Jennifer Dods, Marcea Ingersoll, and CJ Dalton, buoyed me on this journey through laughter and honest sharing of our mutual experiences. There are so many other colleagues with whom I have shared parts of this journey and who have impacted me and enhanced my journey: Lisa Mitchell, Julia Brook, Lorraine Godden, Scott Hughes, Heidi Mack, Launa Gauthier, Megan Troop, are a few among the many.

To the supportive professionals, who have facilitated my student life at Queen’s University, I am forever appreciative: Librarian, Brenda Reed, has been my constant go to person over the years providing lovely personal as well as professional support and I appreciate the exceptional support I received from the entire Faculty of Education’s library team; Marlene Sayers with her administrative team, as well as Erin Wicklam, and Jamie Kincaid keep the Faculty running smoothly and have therefore made my student life an easier and happy experience.

Before I turn my attention to the professors who directly guided me through my dissertation, I would like to acknowledge all of the wonderful professors in our faculty
with whom I have taken classes and who have helped shaped my thinking in so many ways. For example, the first two classes I took in the summer of 2008 with Dr. Rena Upitis and Dr. Katharine Smithrim will stay with me forever—they were my gateway into academia.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my committee who guided, drew, and pushed me through this dissertation. I begin my thanks by acknowledging Dr. Susan Wilcox. I grew so much under her mentorship and expertise with Transformative Learning. Since Dr. Wilcox’s retirement, I have continued to miss the fun-filled and stimulating conversations we shared that always left me uplifted and curious to learn more. Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler stepped in to fill the void left by Dr. Wilcox’s retirement. My respect for Dr. Luce-Kapler’s expertise, calm demeanour, wise ways, and professionalism has grown steadily over the course of our relationship. I will be eternally grateful for the personal support and continuous guidance she provided. Beyond Dr. Luce-Kapler’s duties as supervisor, I would like to thank her specifically for instilling in me the love of story and opening my thinking to appreciate the variety of possible ways to conduct research. I want to give a special thank you to Dr. Nancy Hutchinson who has been with me since I entered the doors of Queen’s in 2008. Her generous gift of time and knowledge has been greatly appreciated and has profoundly impacted my work. Dr. John Freeman has rounded out my committee. His research expertise, attention to detail, and knowledge have been invaluable. As my dissertation approached conclusion, Dr. Ricca Edmondson, Dr. Jennifer Medves, and Dr. Ben Kutsyuruba served as external examiners at my oral defence and I extend my gratitude for their generosity of time, making important contributions to this final document, and for challenging my future thinking.
I thank each and everyone mentioned here and those many others who have journeyed with me. As the wonderful participants in this study pointed out on so many occasions, we are but one small part of a greater whole. Nothing we ever do is in isolation. The credit for this dissertation belongs to my burgeoning and widening circle of valued family, friends, associates, and colleagues. Thank you all!
Table of Contents

Dedication ........................................................................................................... ii
Abstract .............................................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................ v
Table of Contents .............................................................................................. ix
List of Figures .................................................................................................... xii
List of Tables .................................................................................................... xiii
Chapter 1 Introduction ...................................................................................... 1
  Research Rationale ......................................................................................... 3
  Implicit Understandings .................................................................................. 10
  Wisdom as Human Excellence ..................................................................... 11
  Study Organization ....................................................................................... 12
Chapter 2 Literature Review ........................................................................... 14
  Global Wisdom Perspectives ....................................................................... 15
    Classic Western Wisdom ............................................................................. 17
  The Empirical Investigation of Wisdom ....................................................... 18
    Progress on Clayton and Birren’s (1980) Four Recommendations ............. 24
    Wisdom as Internal to the Individual ......................................................... 36
  Reflection and Wisdom ............................................................................... 49
    Transformative Learning Theory ............................................................... 50
    Conscious Awareness ................................................................................. 52
  Spirituality and Wisdom .............................................................................. 54
    Transcendent Wisdom .............................................................................. 58
  Social and Collective Nature of Wisdom ..................................................... 59
  Summary ....................................................................................................... 61
Chapter 3 A Phenomenological Approach .................................................... 64
  Step 1: The Research Questions Based on Wonder ..................................... 70
  Step 2: Researcher’s Biases Regarding the Phenomenon ........................... 71
  Step 3: Collection of First-hand Experience Data ....................................... 72
    Study Design ............................................................................................... 72
    Ethics ........................................................................................................... 76
  Recruitment and Nomination Process ......................................................... 76
  Securing Study Participants ....................................................................... 78
  The Data ........................................................................................................ 80
  Data Management ....................................................................................... 86
  Descriptive Accounts of Participants ......................................................... 87
  Step 4: Theme Identification ....................................................................... 88
    Data Organization and Interpretation ....................................................... 88
  Step 5: Lay Out the Themes with Exemplary Quotations ........................... 91
  Step 6: Write and Re-write to Describe the Phenomenon ......................... 92
  Study Limitations ......................................................................................... 93
  Chapter Summary ......................................................................................... 96
Chapter 4 Findings: Eight Wisdom Profiles and Understandings of Wisdom ... 97
Seven Grandfathers Plus One ........................................... 98
Allen – The Voyageur ...................................................... 100
Anne – The Community Developer ................................. 102
Deborah – The Gardener ................................................. 103
Harold – The Naturalist Professor ..................................... 105
Rachael – The Art Therapist ............................................ 106
Stephen – The Trustee ..................................................... 107
Tessa – The Social Activist .............................................. 108
Vera – The Writer ......................................................... 110
In Their Own Words ......................................................... 111
Life Approach ............................................................... 111
Descriptions of Wisdom ................................................ 113
Patterns and Themes Associated with Wisdom .................. 116
Pattern 1: Self ............................................................ 116
Pattern 2: Self-in-Relation-to-Other .................................. 119
Chapter Summary .......................................................... 125
Chapter 5 Findings: First Comes The Practicing ................. 126
Practice Defined ........................................................... 126
The Participants’ Life Practices: Preparation for Performance ... 127
Patterns and Themes Associated with Wise Practices ........... 130
Pattern 1: Self ............................................................ 131
Pattern 2: Self-in-Relation-to-Other .................................. 134
Body of Wise Practice ..................................................... 136
Chapter Summary .......................................................... 138
Chapter 6 Findings: Wise Acts ........................................... 139
Wise Exemplars ............................................................ 139
Participants’ Wise Acts .................................................... 141
Patterns and Themes Associated with Wise Acts ................. 144
Pattern 1: Self ............................................................ 144
Pattern 2: Self-in-Relation-to-Other .................................. 154
The Role of the Witness .................................................. 158
Chapter Summary .......................................................... 160
Chapter 7 Findings: The Relational Complexity of It All ....... 161
Participants’ Understandings of the Development of Wisdom ... 161
Participants’ Understandings of the Relationship amongst Wise Acts, Wise Practices, and Wisdom .............. 169
Living the Seven Grandfather Teachings ............................. 173
Humility ................................................................. 173
Honesty ................................................................. 174
Respect ................................................................. 174
Courage ................................................................. 175
Wisdom ................................................................. 176
Truth ................................................................. 177
Love ................................................................. 178
Chapter Summary .......................................................... 179
# Chapter 8 Pulling It All Together

Wise Practices ............................................................................................................. 180
Wise Acts and Wisdom ............................................................................................... 186
Wise Acts ...................................................................................................................... 188
Wisdom ......................................................................................................................... 192
Relationship of Wise Acts and Wisdom ..................................................................... 194
Wisdom’s Social Nature ............................................................................................. 195
The Wise-Act-Catalyst ................................................................................................. 199
The Receptive-Witness ............................................................................................... 200
Research Implications and Recommendations ....................................................... 202
Recommendations for Further Study .......................................................................... 203
Implications for Everyday Life .................................................................................... 206
Leaving This Study ...................................................................................................... 207
Last Words To The Wise Nominees ............................................................................ 208

References ....................................................................................................................... 210
Appendix A Recruitment Poster ................................................................................... 227
Appendix B Nominator Form ...................................................................................... 228
Appendix C Letter of Information for Wise Nominee .................................................... 230
Appendix D Consent Form for Wise Nominee ............................................................... 232
Appendix E Summary Research Study (Taylor, 2010) ..................................................... 234
Appendix F Holliday and Chandler’s Factor Structure of Wisdom ............................... 235
Appendix G Ethics Letter of Study Clearance .............................................................. 237
Appendix H First Interview Guide and Sample Questions ............................................. 238
Appendix I Second Interview Guide and Sample Questions ........................................ 240
Appendix J Themed Group Discussion Meetings ....................................................... 241
Appendix K Confidentiality Form for Transcriber ....................................................... 247
List of Figures

Figure 1: Classic Wisdom Perspectives................................................................. 17
Figure 2: Harold's Diagram of the Development of Wisdom................................. 162
Figure 3: Deborah's Diagram of the Development of Wisdom............................. 164
Figure 4: Vera's Diagram of the Development of Wisdom.................................... 165
Figure 5: Tessa's Diagram of the Development of Wisdom.................................. 166
Figure 6: Rachael's Diagram of the Development of Wisdom............................. 167
Figure 7: Anne's Diagram of the Development of Wisdom.................................. 168
Figure 8: Diagram of a Situated Wise Act............................................................. 196
List of Tables

Table 1: Theoretical Foci and Methodological Approaches Used to Study Wisdom...... 22
Table 2: Central Themes and Categories, Research Findings Taylor (2010).................. 35
Table 3: Comparative Table of Phenomenological Methodologies .......................... 68
Table 4: Data Collection Timeline........................................................................ 80
Table 5: The Eight Participants................................................................................ 87
Table 6: Patterns and Themes.................................................................................. 91
Table 7: Participants' Practices .............................................................................. 129
Table 8: Nominees' Wise Act Experiences and Lessons Learned......................... 142
Chapter 1

Introduction

A wise old owl sat in an oak
The more he saw the less he spoke
The less he spoke the more he heard.
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?

Old English Nursery Rhyme

As an individual in the second half of my life, I wonder what contribution elders are able to make to society. As our physical capabilities diminish and life experiences multiply, I suspect our endowment must stem from the sage advice we are able to render; the wisdom we may impart. My romanticized matriarchal vision of wisdom has me seated in a comfortable wing back chair settled in close to a fireplace with my children and grandchildren circled about listening, waiting for my words of wisdom. This elaborate apparition of my flourishing wisdom has likely emerged from an unfounded expectation that my increasing age would be accompanied by increasing wisdom. This notion that age and wisdom are related has seeped into my psyche, I suspect, as part of my Western cultural upbringing.
I grew up hearing the common expression “older but wiser” and the nursery rhyme that opens this chapter links the descriptors wise and old with the owl\(^1\). Our concept of wisdom is culturally transmitted across generations through stories, games, and fairy tales (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). From the realm of science, the developmental psychologist Erickson (1982) described eight human developmental life stages and paired the psychosocial strength of wisdom with his eighth life stage, Old Age. Erikson’s theories were introduced in North America in the 1950s, and it is very likely that my understanding of wisdom accompanying old age was also influenced by this evolving Western scientific perspective of wisdom.

In truth, I had not given wisdom a moment’s thought for most of my life. Only when I began to question what I, along with my cohort of citizens, have to offer society in the second half of our lives did wisdom enter into my field of consideration. van Manen (2014) tells us that a phenomenological question may arise when we have had time to pause and reflect on an experience. I wonder not only from where or how wisdom is expected to emerge but more specifically what wisdom is. van Manen (2014) speaks of this phenomenological wondering and interest as an attempt to “grasp attentively the living sense of the experience before we have lifted it up into cognitive, conceptual, or theoretical determination of clarity” (p. 39).

\(^1\) The owl represents a Western cultural symbol for wisdom that originated from Greek mythology; Athena, the goddess of wisdom, had the owl as her symbol.
I decided to return to academia to learn from the field of social sciences and humanities about the phenomenon of wisdom as my 60 years of life experience, my 30 years of motherhood, and my 25 plus years of professional business experience had not afforded me answers to my wonderings about wisdom. Staudinger (1996) tells us that “age is no guarantee for an actual increase of wisdom-related knowledge and skill” (p. 285). Rather she suggests there are many factors including wisdom-facilitative experiences that lead to personal wisdom. Through the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University, I completed a Master’s degree. My research examined life lesson learning as one aspect of the complex phenomenon of wisdom (Taylor, 2010). I realized upon completion of that study that I had barely scratched the surface of knowing about wisdom. I also learned that I was not alone in my quest to know about wisdom; “the quest for wisdom is roughly as old as humankind” (Staudinger & Glück, 2011, p. 216). This dissertation continues my personal quest for learning that aims to hold the phenomenon of wisdom to the light and provide new insights into its lived experience. I invite you, the reader, to accompany me on this learning journey.

**Research Rationale**

My education of wisdom began with an examination of the literature. I learned that, although philosophers and theologians have theorized, debated, and preached about wisdom for centuries, the empirical investigation of wisdom has only recently commenced through the field of lifespan psychology. Hall was one of the first psychologists to bring attention to the concept of wisdom in 1922, and Erickson in the
1950s theorized that wisdom was the ideal endpoint of personality growth (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). However, only into the latter part of the 20th century was the first empirical study of wisdom conducted (Clayton, 1976). Clayton’s study was designed to examine “the underlying structure of wisdom as it is perceived by individuals across the life span” (Clayton & Birren, 1980, p. 112). Prior to Clayton’s work, wisdom was not taken seriously in the psychological sciences as evidenced by its omission as a topic or even indexed in early seminal works such as The Principles of Psychology, the Handbook of General Psychology, and An Intellectual History of Psychology (Birren & Svensson, 2005).

Since Clayton’s (1976) research, significant contributions have been made by the scientific community to explore, describe, and define the phenomenon of wisdom. Yet even today, the body of wisdom research must still be considered in an early phase. Only a small number of quantitative studies have been conducted over the past 40 years and no more than a dozen or so qualitative studies have been undertaken. Trowbridge (2011) reported examining all of the wisdom research worldwide and at that time could consult “more than 100 research studies involving wisdom” (p. 150), a relatively small number of studies given the magnitude and complexity of the phenomenon.

Wisdom research, which began with lifespan psychologists, was taken up by other psychologists from their fields of personality research, research on intelligence, language pragmatics, and motivational psychology (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005). Interest in the study of wisdom has gathered momentum. Sociologists are conducting research on the

Explicit and implicit theoretical approaches are employed in wisdom’s study. Explicit theories aim to assess and measure the dimensions and performance of wisdom, while implicit theories rely on folk or laypersons’ understanding of wisdom (Bluck & Glück, 2005; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005; Kunzmann & Stange, 2007; Sternberg, 1990a). Through all of the wisdom theories offered and research conducted to date, there is no universal acceptance of wisdom’s definition, description, or development. What we do know, is that laypeople have a clear understanding of what wisdom means to them. The implicit line of wisdom research has led to the following common findings: (a) laypersons can clearly distinguish wisdom from other human capacities; (b) wisdom represents human excellence; and (c) wisdom is seen as multi-dimensional, comprised of cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational capacities (Kunzmann & Stange, 2007).

We can say of the overall body of scientific inquiry into wisdom today:

- The research on wisdom continues and is increasing (Ardelt, 2005b).

- Individuals have an implicit understanding of what wisdom means to them based on their cultural environment (Bluck & Glück, 2005; Kunzmann & Stange, 2007; Takahashi & Bordia, 2000).

- The explicit construct of wisdom remains elusive (Birren & Svensson, 2005; Sternberg, 1990).
A noted gap in the literature exists concerning the expression of wisdom (Birren & Svensson, 2005). That gap in the literature is partly addressed through this doctoral dissertation. This research is a phenomenological, evidence-based, implicit theory inquiry of wisdom that examines the lived experiences of nominated Canadian wise individuals. It describes what individuals, nominated as wise, experience first-hand with regards to their wise acts and practices, and how these relate to wisdom. The intent of this study, while collecting the data from wise persons in a social context as well as from them individually, is to provide voice and witness to those who have a demonstrated history of performing wise acts. The actions, practices, and behaviours of nominated wise individuals are the focus of this study rather than the more traditional examination of personality traits, intelligence, knowledge, expertise, or life stage development phases. The study design also departs from tradition by making use of facilitated group discussions and activities to enable the participants to report on their past experiences while allowing them to engage in new thinking on wisdom. Descriptive accounts of reported wise acts and practices are gathered and amalgamated from the lived experiences of this study’s group of wise nominees. The purpose of these descriptions is to provide an understanding of how these nominated wise persons habitually behave, but more so, to explore how these individuals’ actions and practices contribute to the expression of wisdom.

The five research questions that guide this phenomenological inquiry are the following:
1. What do wise adults describe as wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom?

2. How do wise adults describe the relationship among wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom?

3. What do wise adults think enables them to perform wise acts?

4. What efforts do wise adults make to enable and enhance their abilities to perform wise acts and to conduct their wise practices?

5. What do wise adults experience as the impact their wise acts and practices have on others, the environment, and themselves including their own learning and their personal development?

Trowbridge (2005) says “the study of exemplars of wisdom…is obviously needed and important research to carry out” (p. 259). This doctoral research contributes to the scientific wisdom literature in that it examines the expression of wisdom through the lived experiences of individuals nominated for their wise acts. According to Loftus, Higgs, and Trede (2011), “there is a need to creatively open up intellectual spaces so that we can explore and articulate this world of practice” (p. 3). Examining the acts and practices of individuals nominated as wise should inform the scientific community’s theories about the construct of wisdom, exposing the dialogical relationship between the practice and theory of wisdom. van Manen (2014) explains how the “phenomenologist distrusts theory” (p. 65) and looks to actual lived experiences, concrete examples of the phenomenon, for understanding.

Phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world; rather, it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world. (van Manen, 2014, p. 66)
Theories can be enriched when backed with experiential realities. This study provides experiential accounts of wisdom in action. Theory and phenomenology may intersect providing a robust and concrete understanding of human phenomena. This dissertation demonstrates that the wise acts and practices of this study’s group of wise nominees do in fact intersect with classic theories of wisdom.

It is my hope that the findings of this doctoral research contribute to our collective understandings of wisdom by presenting a credible perspective of wisdom as emerging through human interaction. At a minimum, the findings of this in-depth phenomenological study should inspire an academic dialogue that examines the complex phenomenon of wisdom as externally manifested as opposed to being person-centered.

As pointed out by O’Toole (2010), qualitative research by its very nature is focused on a manageable bounded subject area so that the “researcher can view phenomena in depth” (p. 121). This approach results in only a partial representation of the phenomena under study at best. This research cannot assume to conclusively explain what wisdom is or how an individual’s wise practices and wise acts completely relate to the expression of wisdom. In fact, because this study consists of a small rather homogenous sampling of wise nominees, the conclusions drawn from this study are not generalizable. van Manen (2014) clearly states “empirical generalizations cannot be drawn from phenomenological studies” (p. 352). He does, however, explain that phenomenological examples “may be considered singular generalizations that make it possible to recognize what is universal about a phenomenon” (p. 352). I leave it to the
reader to decide what of the reported descriptions and experiences of the study’s participants may be recognizable if not generalizable.

This study contributes to our collective knowledge of wisdom and addresses the global call to find ways our ageing population can be regarded as useful contributing members of society. Over the next four decades, the percentage of people aged 60 years of age and over is expected to rise to 22% of the total world population. This is a significant change because this age group has only grown from 8% to 10% over the past six decades. Dr. Margaret Chan, the Director-General of the World Health Organization says we need to adapt to these changes and see the opportunities and not only the challenges offered by this shift in our global demographic (World Economic Forum, 2012). Baltes and Smith (2008) suggest a special need for research on wisdom has emerged because of our ageing population. They suggest “a research focus on wisdom and related concepts is one way to promote a balanced picture of old age as potentially being a period of psychological vitality as well as one of inevitable physical losses” (p. 63).

My early perception of wisdom as being associated with old age has shifted, but that perspective remains predominant in society. Evidence of that can be seen in the age of the participants nominated for this study, who range from 62-93 years. Other studies that have used nominated individuals have drawn from this same age demographic (Krafcik, 2011; Lyster, 1996; Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990). If this study of wisdom has the possibility, as Baltes and Smith (2008)
suggest, to promote a renewed perspective on ageing as a period of vitality and wise contributions, then this study as well as future studies that examine the phenomenon of wisdom should positively inform and serve our global community.

**Implicit Understandings**

In the beginning phase of this research process, I struggled with crafting definitions of wisdom, wise acts, and wise practices. I was advised by my research committee to put those definitions aside and to remain open to what my participants brought forward. Based on that advice, this study has relied on nominators’ and nominees’ implicit understandings of the terms wisdom, wise persons, wise acts, and wise practices. All of these terms were used in the recruitment poster, the nominator form, the letter of information, and the consent form (see Appendices A-D). No definitions were supplied to nominators and nominees, and if I was asked, I reassured them they could rely on their personal understandings of the terms. I explained it was quite possible these terms meant different things to different people but that divergence in views was acceptable as the point of this study was to explore with the nominees their understandings and lived experiences associated with these terms. Bluck and Glück (2004) used this same strategy of employing implicit understandings for their study that used narrative accounts to study how wisdom is experienced. They relied on individuals’ subjective definitions of wisdom and justified their use of participants’ implicit understandings of wisdom as follows:

As our interest is in individuals’ meaning making from their own subjective experience, however, it is only fitting that they (not we or other “experts”) define
what is wise and what is not….as it happens, the differences between lay persons’ and experts’ definitions of wisdom…vary little, making the issue rather moot. (p. 546)

I was very grateful for my committee’s advice to rely on my participants’ implicit understandings of wisdom. In hindsight, I see that my early crafted definitions would have influenced the data collected and in the end would not have aligned with the study’s findings.

**Wisdom as Human Excellence**

Further reasoning for relying on participants’ implicit understandings is that a universally accepted definition of wisdom has not as yet been crafted by the community of wisdom researchers (Ardelt, 2005a; Baltes & Smith, 2008; Birren & Fisher, 1990; Bluck & Glück, 2005). Part of the problem with defining wisdom is that it is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon; it is difficult to capture all aspects of this phenomenon in a singular definition. Early pre-Socratic Greek conceptions of wisdom “maintained that people could approximate but never achieve the complete state of understanding that would constitute true wisdom” (Holliday & Chandler, 1986, p. 14). Similarly, but for reasons associated with his religious beliefs, Augustine (354-430) presumed wisdom to be unattainable but a worthy goal to strive towards (Holliday & Chandler, 1986). The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who lived long after Augustine, also saw wisdom as a lofty unattainable human ideal. Birren and Svensson (2005), in their account of wisdom in history, tell us that Kant wrote “men did not
possess wisdom but only felt love for it. Wisdom remained the idea, the model, never to be attained” (p. 11).

The perspective of wisdom as an unattainable state of human excellence supports the consistent reporting within the literature that nominated wise individuals do not see themselves as wise (Edmondson, 2013; Jarvis, 2011; Taylor, 2010). If wisdom is an unattainable ideal rather than a form of being, then we are misguided searching for the correct knowledge formula or the perfect composite set of personality traits that determines the presence of personal wisdom. This study departs from that path of wisdom exploration and focuses on the actions wise individuals report taking in their daily lives. Wisdom is not seen as a set of given or developed fixed human capacities. Rather wisdom is seen as a form of human excellence. This view is consistent with laypeople’s reported understandings that “wisdom represents human excellence” (Kuntzmann & Stange, 2007, p. 307). This study relies on laypeople’s implicit understandings that wisdom represents human excellence as it explores, with the study’s wise nominees, their lived experiences of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom.

**Study Organization**

Holliday and Chandler (1986) offer two approaches to achieve an understanding of wisdom. One way is to discover what is meant by wisdom and the other is to rediscover the meaning of wisdom as it has been understood over time. The research approach I have adopted aims to both discover and rediscover the meaning of wisdom. I have designed a phenomenological research vehicle to explore with a select group of
nominated wise individuals their 21st century Western understandings of the meaning of wisdom. The study’s findings derived from the participants’ understandings of wisdom with its associated wise acts and practices are aligned with some of the historic theories and philosophies of wisdom in the final discussion chapter.

This dissertation is laid out in a classical manner. This first introductory chapter provides the rationale for conducting this study. Chapter 2 walks the reader through the literature that informs and positions this study. The design and methodological approach for this phenomenological inquiry are detailed in Chapter 3, while Chapter 4 provides descriptive biographies of the study’s wise nominees that are designed to allow the reader to grasp some insight into the lived experiences of these participants. In Chapter 5 through to Chapter 7, the voices of the study’s participants are clearly distinguished as the findings are laid out into patterns and themes. The discussion and summation of this phenomenological inquiry takes place in Chapter 8 titled “Pulling It All Together.” In an act of discovery and rediscovery the lived experiences of this study’s wise nominees, as they relate to wisdom, are summarized and a new perspective on the age-old phenomenon of wisdom is presented.

“There is no subject so old that something new cannot be said about it.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky
Chapter 2

Literature Review

To make the argument for this research on wise acts and practices, the literature review is presented in five sections. The first section provides a brief global overview of the history of wisdom that demonstrates the importance of this topic. This section also sets the stage for the second section that traces the empirical investigation of wisdom from the last quarter of the 20th century onward. In the second section, I review progress on research on four areas as suggested by the first researchers to study wisdom. Then I argue that most empirical studies have focused on wisdom as internal to the individual.

The third section of this literature review examines the role of reflection in wisdom. As reflection is one of the most consistently reported and attributable components of wisdom, multiple bodies of literature that support the relationship of reflection to wisdom are presented. Transformative Learning Theory is introduced in this section as it explains and endorses the use of critical reflective thinking in the process of perspective transformation. Reflection is a process of re-examination and re-evaluation of our daily experiences that fosters awareness. Literature on conscious awareness is also included in this third section.

The fourth literature review section addresses the connection of spirituality with wisdom, while the fifth and final section examines the literature with respect to the social and collective nature of wisdom.
Global Wisdom Perspectives

Humankind has collectively been grappling with understanding the elusive phenomenon of wisdom for centuries; we have examined wisdom from many perspectives. Over the course of history and in different locations on our planet, we have cared about wisdom and collectively made additions to its storyline. There have been dormant periods when our wisdom story has laid quietly at rest, but eventually it gets picked up again by a new generation of inspired philosophers or researchers who weave new themes into the story and the wisdom emphasis shifts.

Oral traditions, songs, and storytelling were some of the earliest means of passing along our folk traditions of wisdom. Distinct bodies of ancient secular wisdom literature emerged in civilizations like Egypt and Mesopotamia as far back as 2500 BC. These wisdom literatures contain collections of parables, proverbs, and short stories, which epitomize principles of correct living, embody moral pronouncements, and contain crucial information about their society. . . . In summary, the secular wisdom literature suggests that wisdom is social and interpersonal in nature, and that wise people exhibit exemplary understandings and behavior. (Holliday & Chandler, 1986, pp. 11-13)

From those ancient folk traditions, concepts of wisdom have evolved distinctly within Eastern and Western cultures. There is consensus within the wisdom literature that wisdom concepts are developed culturally (Brown, 2005; Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Sternberg, 2000). Yang (2011) explains that, “conceptions of wisdom develop in a cultural context” (p. 46), and these different cultural ways produce different world-views that in turn shape our conception of wisdom. Takahashi and Bordia (2000) assessed the
contextual nature of wisdom in a cross-cultural, descriptor-rating study and concluded that, as they predicted, “the conceptualization of wisdom in the West differs from that in the East” (p. 1).

The Eastern concept of wisdom has been influenced by the philosophies and religions of India and China (Birren & Svensson, 2005; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Yang & Sternberg, 1997a, 1997b). Taoism and Confucius’ teachings in China along with influences of the Buddha in India have helped shape Eastern perspectives. In the West, the teachings of the early Greek philosophers and the religious teachings of the Bible have influenced Westerners’ perceptions of wisdom (Birren & Svensson, 2005; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Jarvis, 2011). The research for this dissertation was conducted in Canada and the perspective of the study’s participants is influenced mainly by Western cultural thought. The very brief historical description of the development of wisdom that is offered here is designed merely to position the current study within the literature. Going forward, this dissertation focuses on the development of the concepts of wisdom in the West. Figure 1 depicts the early evolving perspectives of wisdom and the cultural heritage that informed those various perspectives.
Figure 1: Classic Wisdom Perspectives

Classic Western Wisdom

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC), distinguished between two concepts of wisdom (Osbeck & Robinson, 2005): practical wisdom (*phronesis*) which “is concerned with what is the best course of action in each case, in each situation” (p. 69) and is “inherently relational” (p. 69); and philosophic wisdom (*sophia*), “knowledge for its own sake” (p. 74). Aristotle further delineated “scientific knowledge itself (*episteme*) from philosophic wisdom (*sophia*)” (p. 71).

Many years later, the philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) “synthesized Western philosophy and Christian beliefs and maintained the distinction between philosophy and religion or between reason and faith” (Birren & Svensson, 2005, p. 7). In short, in Western culture, virtuous conduct or practical wisdom (*phronesis*)
became more the domain of the church, while the study of philosophic wisdom (*Sophia*) along with the study of scientific knowledge (*episteme*) became the domain of academia. For hundreds of years in academia the phenomenon of wisdom was left to the philosophers. In academia today, however, there is a new emphasis on the science of wisdom.

**The Empirical Investigation of Wisdom**

The empirical investigation of wisdom was spurred in the latter part of the 20th century by Clayton’s (1976) pioneering research. Since then, the phenomenon of wisdom has been empirically examined using various theoretical foci and methodological approaches. At the core of most theoretical frameworks used to examine wisdom is the underlying concept that wisdom is intrinsic to the individual. In other words, some few or special individuals may be considered to be wise persons. Research has been conducted to describe and define wisdom but it has also been conducted to determine what characteristics, skill set, personality traits, intelligence, or expertise contribute to the making of a wise person.

Many theoretical perspectives underpin the wisdom research conducted to date. Among these theoretical foci are views of wisdom as: (a) a form of intelligence, knowledge, or expertise (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Baltes & Staudinger, 1993, 2000; Sternberg, 1998, 2000); (b) a composite of personality traits (Ardelt 2003, 2004; Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990; Wink & Helson, 1997); (c) a form of behaviour (Oser, Schenker, & Spychiger, 1999; Edmondson 2005, 2012, 2013); (d) a developmental life span
perspective (Erickson, 1982; Glück & Bluck, 2013; Levitt, 1999; Taylor, 2010); (e) a process (Yang, 2008a, 2008b); and (f) multi-dimensional (Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Krafcik, 2011; Lyster, 1996).

To explore these various wisdom perspectives and theoretical foci, researchers over the past 40 years have employed a variety of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches to investigate the phenomenon of wisdom. Some typical approaches used to explore wisdom are briefly described here.

Quantitative approaches to the study of wisdom began with descriptor-rating studies. This type of study makes use of select groups of individuals from the general population to sort, rate, and compare descriptions of wisdom and wisdom-related information. This methodology has mostly been employed to define and describe wisdom (Clayton, 1976; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Jason et al., 2001). Evaluative approaches have also been used to investigate wisdom. One evaluative approach, designed and employed by researchers working with the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, rates individuals’ think aloud responses to problematic social scenarios. This approach evaluates the respondents’ level of personal wisdom expertise (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). Another evaluative approach uses self-report measures to rank selected individuals’ wisdom expertise (Ardelt, 2003; Webster, 2003, 2007). At times, evaluative wisdom approaches are accompanied by a second phase of research that collects qualitative data via interviews from ranked wisdom scorers (Ardelt, 2005a; Lyster, 1996).
Qualitative approaches to examining the phenomenon of wisdom have not been extensive. One qualitative research approach involves collecting autobiographical narrative data from select groups within the general population about their personal experiences with wisdom (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Glück & Bluck, 2013; Oser, Schenker, & Spychiger, 1999). A unique ethnographic approach poses questions, within a specific cultural setting, to individuals who know of or have experience of others they consider to be wise (Edmondson, 2005, 2012, 2013). A few studies have made use of a nomination process to identify famous or well-known wise persons (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995; Paulhus, Wehr, Harms, & Strasser, 2002).

The research approach employed by this current phenomenological study aims to learn directly from individuals nominated by their peers to be wise. This qualitative data collection approach comes closest to learning from those who are considered to practice wisdom. Only a few studies have adopted this approach of gathering direct lived experience wisdom data from peer-nominated wise exemplars (Krafcik, 2011; Lyster, 1996; Montgomery, Barber, & Mckee, 2002; Taylor, 2010; Yang, 2008a, 2008b). This current study adopts a new approach different from these earlier studies because: (a) it specifically collects lived experience data concerning wise nominees’ wise acts and practices; (b) participants were nominated by their peers for their recognized wise acts and general wise behaviours; and (c) data were uniquely collected not only from in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with each of the participants but also from a series of in-depth group discussion sessions with the participants.
Extensive and comprehensive reviews of the wisdom literature have already been conducted that provide a broad examination of the wisdom phenomenon (Staudinger, 2008; Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Trowbridge, 2005). For this review of the literature, I have chosen to concentrate on a few studies that (a) use a peer nomination process to identify wise individuals, (b) are either qualitative in nature or have a qualitative component to their data collection, or (c) whose findings directly or indirectly inform this current study. I have also made an attempt to represent at least one study or a body of work from each of the typical theoretical foci and methodological approaches that have been employed to study wisdom over these past 40 years. Table 1 charts the empirical wisdom studies presented in this literature review by identifying their theoretical focus and their methodological approach.
Table 1: Theoretical Foci and Methodological Approaches Used to Study Wisdom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor-Rating Quantitative</th>
<th>Intelligence or Expert Knowledge</th>
<th>Personality Traits</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Multi-dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The field of wisdom study can still be considered in its early stages. Trowbridge (2005) suggests that wisdom is only into the second stage of Sternberg’s (1990b) four-stage description of a field of knowledge, where the second stage represents the period
when researchers and theorists are convincing others of the worth of their paradigms. Our collective knowledge of wisdom remains, after almost 40 years, very much in that second knowledge stage. Part of the reason is due to the phenomenon’s many facets. Researchers and theorists from various fields inevitably happen upon this topic. Psychologists, philosophers, educators, sociologists, and anthropologists find themselves brushing up against this phenomenon. The wondering begins, some research follows, and then these researchers and theorists return to their main field of study. There are, however, a few researchers who have remained dedicated to the empirical investigation of wisdom over time—Ardelt, Baltes, Bluck, Glück, Staudinger, and Sternberg—all have made consistent contributions to the field of wisdom study. Some of the work of these well-known researchers is reported in this review of the literature along with some lesser known doctoral research that has investigated wisdom.

From 1976 to 1982, Clayton published several papers that inspired academic discussion and were the impetus for empirical investigations into the phenomenon. Clayton’s dissertation findings were described in a paper, which distinguished wisdom as multidimensional in nature (Clayton & Birren, 1980). Her study’s theoretical focus viewed wisdom as a personality trait and she used a descriptor-rating methodological approach to her study. A multidimensional scaling algorithm was used to test participants’ understandings of wisdom. Eighty-three individuals within three groups from a university community participated in this empirical investigation: students (average age of 21), faculty and staff (average age of 49), and volunteers from a
gerontology centre (average age of 70). All participants judged the similarity of 105 combinations of 15 predetermined descriptors of wise individuals on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 the highest and 5 the lowest degree of similarity between pairs of stimuli. Data analysis showed that the qualities with respect to the structure of cognition were consistent but clustered differently across the cohorts, while both the affective and reflective components clustered similarly across all three cohorts. The affective component was characterized by understanding, empathy, peacefulness, and gentleness, while the reflective component of wisdom was identified as consisting of introspective and intuitive qualities. This study found that wisdom was perceived by its participants “as an attribute representing the integration of general cognitive, affective, and reflective qualities” (Clayton & Birren, 1980, p. 118). This important finding and Clayton’s work set the stage for pursuant studies on wisdom.

**Progress on Clayton and Birren’s (1980) Four Recommendations**

Along with the reported findings of Clayton’s (1976) doctoral research, four areas for future research were recommended by Clayton and Birren (1980): (a) the study of behavioural criteria that would identify wise from unwise individuals, (b) studies that would relate wisdom to species survival from an evolutionary perspective, (c) cross-cultural examinations of the universal aspects of wisdom, and (d) explorations of how individuals might achieve wisdom across their lifespan from a developmental perspective. Since Clayton’s (1976) seminal research, much work has been undertaken with respect to the phenomenon of wisdom; however, not one of the four recommended
areas of research listed above has been studied in depth or has led to consensus in the field.

**Behavioural criteria.** To operationalize the construct of wisdom, Clayton and Birren (1980) recommend that researchers explore what behaviours would differentiate wise individuals from others. Drawing from the historic literature, these authors reference Solomon’s biblical wise act as an example of wisdom and the ancient Greeks’ consideration of wise acts as being interpersonal in nature, moral, and ethical. The philosopher Curnow (2011) points out that, “wise people can be identified by their doing wise things and saying wise things….wise actions and words are the outward manifestation of their wisdom” (p. 97). However, little wisdom research has focused on actions or behaviours.

Four studies are reviewed. Only the first study, Oser, Schenker, and Spychiger (1999), specifically focuses on wise action. Two implicit theory studies, Montgomery, Barber, and McKee (2002) and Bluck and Glück (2004), are included in this section. The participants in these two studies were asked about acting wisely, although that was not the main focus of these works. Finally, Yang’s (2008a) empirical research, which views wisdom as a process, incorporates action into its definition and therefore is included in this section.

The chronological first of the four studies I have organized under Clayton’s call for studies on wise behaviours is the Oser, Schenker, and Spychiger (1999) paper. These authors suggest that “wisdom is in the act itself and is treated always as situated wisdom”
Oser et al. (1999) report on their body of work. They initially developed seven criteria to assess clinical interviews about wise acts, which the authors present in some detail with short excerpts from the clinical interviews they conducted. Recently Staudinger and Glück (2011) have referred to these seven criteria that characterize a wise act. Oser et al. (1999) suggest that their seven criteria “refer to the adaptive capability of human beings” (p. 157). The criteria are the following (a) the paradoxical exit of the unexpected, (b) moral integrity, (c) selflessness, (d) overcoming internal and external dictates, (e) a new homeostasis between the one in possession of something and the one not in possession of it—‘Robin Hood Effect’, (f) risk, and (g) improvement of the human condition. They suggest that only five of the criteria must be present in order to speak about wisdom. They report briefly on some validity testing conducted on the seven wise act criteria that did not appear to result in significant findings. A 15-item questionnaire with a 6-point rating scale was administered to two groups: (a) 199 Hungarian teachers and students, and (b) 149 Swiss teachers and students. Factor analysis resulted in a 3-factor solution, with the authors labelling the factors as Solidarity, Situated Intelligence, and Risk Taking, which the authors saw as bringing “the danger of loosing the distinctness of wise acts” (p. 165). The work of these authors does not appear to have been advanced by any other researchers. There have been no studies focused on wise acts until this current study.

The second study I chose to report under this behavioural category is Montgomery, Barber, and Mckee’s (2002) phenomenological inquiry of wisdom as
experienced by six older adults, aged 60 to 88. I believe this was the only phenomenological study of wisdom conducted before the current study. The purpose was to contrast the lived experience of being wise or having experience of wise persons with the findings of previous implicit theory studies of wisdom. Participants were selected based on their significant experience and/or long-standing professional background with wisdom-facilitative work. Baltes and Staudinger (1993) defined wisdom-facilitative work as including teaching, pastoral counselling, or leadership in positions of civic responsibility, a concept that has been employed in several of the studies that seek participant nominations including the current study. The six participants were interviewed and asked two questions: “Can you describe one or more times in your life in which you believe you were wise, or acted wisely?” and “Can you describe a wise person in your life?” (Montgomery et al., 2002, p. 142). Audio-recorded interviews were analyzed to yield themes about the participants’ lived experiences and what they had learned from others they believed to be wise. The authors concluded that guidance, experience, moral principles, and compassionate relationships are all essential elements of wisdom and that wisdom is often only revealed in hindsight.

Montgomery et al.’s (2002) study established the value of learning directly from individuals’ lived experience of wisdom. Trowbridge (2011) points out that there have been few studies that involve “people who have a claim to be considered wise” (p. 158). The report of the findings provided little information on the criteria for the selection of the participants and few details about the interview process. For example, no information
was provided on the amount of time that was spent learning from and interviewing each participant. The findings focused little on the wise actions of the participants, although that was one of the two research questions of this study.

Bluck and Glück’s (2004) study, on learning a lesson and experiencing wisdom, aimed to analyze ordinary persons’ narrative accounts of their remembered or experienced wisdom. To learn if ordinary individuals have a sense of their ability for wise thought and action and about how this view is embedded in their life stories, the researchers employed a memory narrative procedure with 86 Caucasian, German participants. The participants, who responded to newspaper and flyer advertisements about the study, were asked to recall and write down within two minutes a list of up to 15 situations when they felt they did or thought something wise. Then participants spoke for as long as they wished about their wisest memory. Next, the participants were asked if they learned a lesson from the event and what that lesson was. The participants’ subjective definitions of wisdom were used as “the differences between lay persons’ and experts’ definitions of wisdom … vary little” (p. 546). All 86 interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded twice by independent trained coders. Only variables with 80% agreement were reported. Fifty pilot interviews, which were conducted and transcribed at the outset of the study, were used to develop codes and to train the coders.

The interviewees’ wise memories were coded into variables that decided if: (a) the situation was fundamentally a wisdom-related memory or not; (b) the situation reported on a life decision, life management strategy, or reaction to a negative event; (c)
the outcome of the event was positive, negative, both, or neither; (d) the time frame of the narrative was related to a single event, generic event (repeated similar events), or an extended event (spanning a long period of time); (e) a lesson was learned which was reported as yes, no, or maybe; and finally (f) the type of lesson learned was generalized, gained factual or procedural knowledge, changed the person’s life philosophy, or the lesson had been previously learned.

One of Bluck and Glück’s (2004) significant findings is that most remembered wisdom events involve thoughts, feelings, or actions that change negative circumstances into more positive ones. They reported 77.9% of the participants learned a lesson from the event, and some of the participants indicated applying the learned lesson over time. The authors reported:

The types of life situations in which people reported experiencing wisdom, regardless of their age, were commonly ones in which they coped with challenging events and were able to transform them and to make things better through their own personal resources. (p. 564)

The findings of this study show the participants report experiencing wisdom through their actions when transforming negative life situations into more positive events.

The fourth in this group of behavioural studies is Yang’s (2008a) two-part study that views wisdom as a process. Yang set out to examine whether the three core components—integration, embodiment, and positive effect—components she had identified in an earlier study, were important in the evaluation, description, and manifestation of wisdom. Yang defines wisdom as “a special kind of real-life process that is achieved after a person cognitively makes an unusual integration, embodies his or her
ideas through action, and hence brings forth positive effects to both self and others” (p. 64).

In Study 1, Yang collected data from open-ended questionnaires completed by 80 Taiwanese nominators of diverse age groups and occupations who were asked to nominate one or two wise individuals and give reasons for their nominations. In all, 70 nominations were made, and three analysts coded and clustered the nominator data for integration, embodiment, and positive effect. Then two raters rated the reasons for nomination on a 7-point scale. The researchers concluded, based on statistical analyses, that these three elements were salient elements for wisdom nomination.

Sixty-six of the 70 wise nominees identified in Study 1 agreed to be interviewed for Study 2. Two-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted, and six analysts labelled and analyzed the transcribed data. Then a research team, comprising the researcher and three analysts, discussed the transcriptions with the six recruited analysts. Together they determined the interviews yielded 220 wisdom incidents. Statistical analyses enabled Yang to conclude that wisdom differed from achievement, and that wisdom did consist of the three core components of integration, embodiment, and positive effect. The results of Yang’s study also suggest that “real-life wisdom can be observed in abundance in the self-narratives of wisdom nominees” (p. 70).

It can be concluded from the four studies that focus on action and address Clayton and Birren’s (1980) call for research that distinguishes wise from unwise behaviours, this research area has not been fully explored over these past 40 years. The Oser et al. (1999)
study directly examined wise actions, Yang’s (2008a) study looked at incidents of wisdom or wise acts, and now this current study picks up that research thread and continues the examination of wise acts along with their associated wise practices.

**Evolutionary perspective.** Clayton and Birren’s (1980) question about the relation of wisdom to species survival has been left relatively untouched. Only Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1990), based on a historical examination of the literature and not empirical research, have attempted to report on this aspect of wisdom. These authors suggest that the meme of wisdom “contains a nucleus of meaning that has been transmitted relatively unchanged for at least 80 generations, providing directions for human thought and behaviour” (p. 26). These authors suggest that wise behaviour is appreciated and preserved by the community and passed on. They also report that wisdom historically has been viewed as a cognitive process, a virtue, or socially valued pattern of behaviour, and as a personally desirable state—“an intrinsically rewarding experience that provides some of the highest enjoyment and happiness available” (p. 49). This evolutionary interpretation of wisdom recognizes the collective and generative aspects of wisdom. The wise nominees of the current study acknowledge the importance and value of an inter-generational perspective in the conduct of their lives. However, empirical work in this research area has yet to be conducted.

**Cross-cultural perspective.** Clayton and Birren (1980) called for research to examine what aspects of wisdom “are universal and transcend the standards and value of a particular society” (p. 127), The historical accounts and the cross-cultural research to
date continue to emphasize the differences in cultural perspectives rather than to identify the universal concepts (Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Staudinger & Glück, 2011, Takahashi & Bordia, 2000; Takahashi & Overton, 2002; Yang, 2001, 2008a, 2011). As the world becomes an ever smaller place, the benefits of an empirical investigation of the universal aspects of wisdom may become more apparent. For example, the current study reports on the daily practices of the study’s Western participants. Some of those reported practices have their roots in Eastern traditions indicating that a global perspective may be instrumental for some wise nominees in their life management and wise actions. Still, Clayton and Birren’s (1980) call for an examination of the universal aspects of wisdom remains open.

**Developmental perspective.** Clayton and Birren (1980) discussed aspects they considered promising for the study of wisdom from Erickson’s, Kohlberg’s, and Piaget’s approaches to development, and hoped that researchers would “focus on exploring how the individual achieves wisdom in the course of a lifetime” (p. 127). However, a quarter of a century later, Birren and Svensson (2005) report that very little work exists that informs us of the development or evolution of wisdom. Two studies that sought to collect direct experience data are reviewed here: Levitt’s (1999) analysis of Tibetan Buddhists’ experience of the development of their personal wisdom; and my earlier case study research on wisdom, Taylor (2010), that explored what processes were employed by nominated wise individuals to learn life lessons and how this learning contributed to the development of personal wisdom.
Levitt’s (1999) qualitative, grounded theory study aimed to explore the development of wisdom from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective. Levitt analyzed interviews with 13 Himalayan monks aged 22 to 40 years old, at various stages of their 3-11 years of study based on “traditional Tibetan Mahayana Buddhist methods of teaching” (p. 89). The semi-structured interviews of 1-2 hours in length focused on the monks’ thoughts and experiences of the development of wisdom. The analysis of the interviews resulted in 95 categories sorted into 13 clusters that were grouped into five areas: (a) definitions of wisdom, (b) facilitative conditions for the development of wisdom, (c) the teaching process, (d) methods of developing wisdom, and (e) personal experiences.

These monks reported on several aspects of wisdom development. There was a consensus among the participants that everyone, regardless of inborn traits, has the potential to become wise and that a strong desire to want to learn is a predisposition in the development of wisdom. Importantly, “none of the monks felt that wisdom can be developed on one’s own . . . assistance from other people was seen as essential” (pp. 94-95). These monks felt that community has influence and plays a role in the development of wisdom either through spiritual teaching, behavioural guidance, or through the process of supportive family and friends. In defining wisdom, the monks reported on the important quality of self-examination and self-knowledge and one’s ability to feel connection to all others. Honesty, humility, respect for all creatures, and compassion were all reported in this study as hallmarks of wisdom. These findings align with the findings of the current study.
The purpose of my Master’s research (Taylor, 2010) was to examine, with nominated wise individuals, (a) the processes and actions they employed to transform life experiences into life lessons, and (b) how these life lessons contributed to the development of their personal wisdom. I conducted a small-scale qualitative case study that studied dyads, nominators and their wise nominees. Each dyad was considered a case with data collected from four cases; eight participants in total completed questionnaires and were interviewed in-depth. Aside from exploring the wise nominees’ lived experience with life lesson learning, I explored with the study’s nominators their opinions, experiences, and relationships with the nominees to understand how they perceived these wise individuals and to corroborate the nominees’ personal understandings of themselves, an approach not generally used in previous studies.

A conceptual framework that guides the current study emerged from that research (see Appendix E). The framework consists of: (a) a model that describes the process of knowledge acquisition and wisdom application, and graphically depicts a wise act and its impact; and (b) the four life management practices reported by the study’s wise individuals that led to my focus on wise practices in the current study. The four themes, which emerged as practices that moderate the life lesson learning process for the group of wise nominees for my earlier study, are summarized in Table 2.
The first three themes (know yourself, be fully engaged in life, and make sense of your experiences) focus on self-reliance. The fourth theme emerged as a complement, an anchor for the study’s participants. All of the study’s nominators and nominees saw themselves as part of a bigger picture, part of the whole. They did not see the world as revolving around them. They were humble individuals who were consciously engaged with life. These nominees felt connected to their world. The findings of this earlier study (Taylor, 2010) fueled my interest in conducting the current study.

The two studies, Levitt (1999) and Taylor (2010), make small contributions towards understanding the development of wisdom. Both studies point to the importance
of self-awareness and self-knowledge in the development process and a connection to community and the greater world.

So far, I have presented some of the empirical research that addresses Clayton and Birren’s (1980) four recommended areas for further wisdom research. The next section describes other explorations regarding the phenomenon of wisdom that have been undertaken since 1980.

**Wisdom as Internal to the Individual**

Wisdom, as stated earlier, is mostly perceived as intrinsic to an individual. In other words, an individual may be considered to be a wise person. Two predominant lines of research have emerged from this ongoing work on wisdom and the wise person; one views wisdom as a form of intelligence, the other views wisdom as a form of personality traits. Both of these research areas along with the research exploration of wisdom’s multi-dimensions are presented in this section.

**Wisdom as a form of intelligence.** Research on wisdom as a form of intelligence, knowledge, or expertise has looked at psychometric models of intelligence such as (a) Baltes and Staudinger’s (1993, 2000) Berlin Wisdom Paradigm, which defines wisdom as an expert knowledge system; and (b) Sternberg’s (1998, 2001) Balance Theory of Wisdom, which defines wisdom as a form of intelligence.

The Berlin Wisdom Paradigm originated at the Max Planck Institute (MPI) for Human Development in Germany and is described by Baltes and Staudinger (2000) as “a research framework describing antecedent factors and mediating processes for the
acquisition and maintenance of wisdom-related knowledge and skills across the life span” (p. 125). A great deal of the wisdom research to date has its origins in this work. A team of researchers at MPI has produced a variety of studies since 1984. These researchers view wisdom as a form of excellence and key to constructing a good life. Central to their work is the concept of the fundamental pragmatics of life which, in their words, means “knowledge and judgment about the essence of the human condition and the ways and means of planning, managing, and understanding a good life” (p. 124). The fundamental pragmatics of life are described as having five criteria: (a) rich factual knowledge of human nature, lifespan development, developmental processes, interpersonal relations, and social norms; (b) rich procedural knowledge dealing with the meaning and conduct of life; (c) lifespan contextualism, which focuses on interrelations and generativity; (d) relativism of values and life priorities, which tolerates individual differences and simultaneously optimizes and balances the individual and common good; and (e) the recognition and management of uncertainty (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). A diagram of this complex procedural model can be found at Baltes and Staudinger (1993, 2000). Various studies conducted by Baltes and his team use this paradigm to operationalize their perspective of wisdom. One methodological approach they have used to test the wisdom scores of individuals rates participants’ think-aloud responses to generated existential life problems according to the five wisdom criteria. Baltes and Staudinger (2000) summarize the findings of a group of studies that employ the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm and in the end leave their analysis with an important question. They ask “to
what degree do people who excel in our wisdom tasks also demonstrate superior outcomes in their own life management” (p. 132)? This research program investigates wisdom as internal to the individual, particularly focusing on wisdom as a form of intelligence.

Sternberg (1998, 2000) has developed a theory of wisdom titled “The Balance Theory of Wisdom,” which also considers wisdom to be closely related to intelligence, that is, to be a special case of practical intelligence. Sternberg distinguishes between three forms of intelligence: analytical, creative, and practical. Tacit knowledge underlies practical intelligence, which in Sternberg’s theory is applied to balance intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests to achieve a common good. Sternberg (2000) explains, “wisdom is involved when practical intelligence is applied to maximizing not just one’s own or someone else’s self-interest, but rather a balance of various self-interests” (p. 638). He considers that individuals’ values mediate how they use their tacit knowledge to balance their responses and interests to contribute to the common good.

Sternberg describes his Balance Theory as differing from the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm in that it addresses the balancing of interests and responses to the environment, whereas the work of Baltes and his colleagues addresses balance as an orchestration of the mind. What is of particular relevance to the current study is that Sternberg claims his balance theory “views wisdom as inherent in the interaction between an individual and a situational context” (p. 637).
The personality traits of wisdom. Other researchers have viewed wisdom as internal to the individual, but focused on personality rather than intelligence. Whether wisdom exists due to specific personality traits or whether certain personality traits arise as a result of wisdom has led to differing theoretical positions. Staudinger, Dörner, and Mickler (2005) explain some of the ambiguities associated with the topic of wisdom and personality. They write that Erickson in 1959 viewed wisdom as a personality characteristic, the pinnacle of personality development whereas researchers aligned with the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm consider “personality characteristics as antecedents, correlates, or consequences of wisdom” (p. 191). Orwoll and Perlmutter (1990), however, suggest that wisdom depends on the ability to go beyond one’s personal perspective to embrace collective and universal concerns. They suggest that wisdom “requires remarkable negotiation of the personality domain, evident in unusual self-development and self-transcendence” (p. 174). Whether wisdom is due to or contributes to specific personality traits, is a competency, or a combination of these, continues to be explored to this day. The work in two research approaches that examine personality traits as relevant to wisdom is presented in this section; Ardelt (2003, 2004, 2005a) and Orwoll and Perlmutter (1990).

Orwoll (1989) completed her doctoral research that explored the affective integration and reflective personality attributes of nominated wise individuals. Orwoll used a peer nomination process that resulted in the participation of 32 wise nominees and 32 creative nominees that formed the comparison group for her study. The participants
ranged from 56 to 98 years of age with a median age of 70. They were all well-educated, most of them were married or had been widowed, and most reported living life satisfactorily. Data were collected via open-ended life history questionnaires and self-report measures. Hypotheses were made as to how the wise nominee group would compare to the creative nominee group, and six distinguishing themes from the life history questionnaires were tested across all responses for their presence or absence.

Orwoll concluded that ego integrity was more predominant in her wise group than in her comparison group. From the life histories, she learned that early awareness of the world and a global perspective were distinguishing wisdom-related themes for the wise participants in her study. Orwoll made the case that “the application of personality theory to the study of wisdom is both a potentially fruitful and a necessary endeavor, if wisdom is to be understood as a multidimensional construct” (p. 100).

The following year Orwoll and Perlmutter (1990) used the results of Orwoll’s study to further make the case for the study of the “whole person” and the value of studying the integration of personality processes in conjunction with cognitive processes to better understand the construct of wisdom. These authors argued that learning about the nature of wisdom, its development, and the consequences of wisdom should best be explored by studying exceptionally wise individuals and that the use of nominators was a viable route to locate these individuals. They summarized that the self-transcendent aspect of personality makes wisdom unique. They described self-transcendence as the ability that allows one “to move beyond individualistic concerns to more collective or
universal issues” (p. 162). This early study made the case for the use of nominators to locate wise exemplars as has been done in the current study, and like the participants’ reports in this study, Orwoll’s (1989) wise exemplars had a global perspective and concern for universal issues.

Ardelt (2003, 2004, 2005a) developed a Three-dimensional Wisdom Scale, which recognizes the integration of the same three personality qualities, cognitive, affective, and reflective, which were first introduced by Clayton (1976). Ardelt conducted a two-part quantitative and qualitative study to empirically assess her wisdom scale. She used 180 participants aged 52-87 years to test the validity of her model and concluded “that the simultaneous presence of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics is necessary but also sufficient for a person to be considered wise” (p. 278). Ardelt (2004) challenged Baltes and his colleagues on their definition of wisdom as expert knowledge and argued the case for her three-dimensional personality characteristic wisdom model. Ardelt’s (2005a) qualitative study conducted interviews with respondents to her Three-dimensional Wisdom Scale (Ardelt, 2003). Top, medium, and low scorers were selected and their interview responses to coping with life’s crises and obstacles were documented. The coping strategies reported by the high wisdom scorers in Ardelt’s (2005a) study informed my life lesson learning model developed for my earlier research (Taylor, 2010).

Recently the case is being made for distinguishing between (a) personal wisdom which refers to insight into one’s self or having intrapersonal skills, and (b) general wisdom, insight into life in general or having interpersonal skills (Staudinger, 2013;
Staudinger, Dörner, & Mickler, 2005; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Staudinger et al. (2005) suggest that it is easier to have insight into the problems and difficulties of others and more difficult to have insight into one’s own life. Staudinger and Glück (2011) add that “progress in general wisdom may precede that in personal wisdom” (p. 229).

Staudinger, Dörner, and Mickler (2005) align personal wisdom with the traditional personality research and general wisdom with the models that take an expertise or knowledge approach to wisdom such as the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm or Sternberg’s Balance Theory of Wisdom. Underlying their distinction is that personal wisdom approaches consider wisdom to be a personality characteristic or composite of personality characteristics, while the view of general wisdom is that wisdom is understood to be “a theoretical object that may crystallize on an individual but also on a societal level, such as constitutional texts (e.g. Staudinger & Baltes, 1994)” (p.193). This last statement opens the way for the argument to be made for viewing wisdom as an object or product that results not on or within an individual, but from an interaction between people as is explored in the current study.

**Wisdom as multi-dimensional.** The majority of the wisdom research undertaken post 1980 has aimed to shed light on varying aspects of the complex construct of wisdom: correlations with age (Baltes & Smith, 1990; Glück, Bluck, Baron, & McAdams, 2005; Jordan, 2005; Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002; Richardson & Pasupathi, 2005); links with moral reasoning (Kupperman, 2005; Pasupathi & Staudinger, 2001); and wisdom’s sub-components and facets (Birren & Fisher, 1990;
Bluck & Glück, 2005). All of this work has aimed to and been successful at expanding our understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon of wisdom. Three studies that acknowledge the complexity of wisdom and address its multi-dimensions are described below. The first is Holliday and Chandler’s (1986) implicit theory descriptor-rating study that developed the prototype of a wise person. As well, two doctoral research studies, Lyster (1996) and Krafcik (2011), which used nominated wise individuals as participants and reported on the multi-dimensions of wisdom, are reviewed.

Holliday and Chandler (1986) conducted an implicit theory descriptor-rating study that developed the prototype of a wise person. This three-phase study, which used over 450 participants and drew upon categorization theory, resulted in the development of a prototype of a wise person that they labelled the Factor Structure of Wisdom (see Appendix F).

The first phase of their study collected and analyzed descriptions of wise people from 50 young adults, 50 middle-aged adults, and 50 seniors. A pool of judges rigorously reduced the 878 descriptors generated to 79 words or phrases categorizing people’s conceptions of wisdom. The list of 79 words was supplemented with an additional 44 descriptors taken from the literature on wisdom, and words not associated with the category wise but associated with other target categories in the study.

During the second phase of their study, Holliday and Chandler (1986) collected data from 250 participants. Fifty young adults, 50 middle-aged adults, and 50 seniors were asked to rate on a 7-point scale the wise descriptors generated in the first phase of
the study. Another 100 subjects rated descriptors for the categories of intelligent, shrewd, perceptive, and spiritual. A five-step analysis determined the reliability of (a) the prototype ratings, (b) cross-cohort agreement, (c) the prototype characteristics, (d) the prototype ratings, and (e) the relationship between wisdom and the other categories.

Holliday and Chandler generated the Factor Structure of Wisdom, which grouped wise descriptors into five ordered factors (a) exceptional understanding, (b) judgment and communication skills, (c) general competencies, (d) interpersonal skills, and (e) social unobtrusiveness.

Thirty-eight subjects were used during the final validation phase of the study in which the researchers concluded the process used to develop their prototype of a wise person was validated and that the results were consistent with other prototype literature. The resulting “Factor Structure of Wisdom” has stood the test of time. More than 15 years later, Bluck and Glück (2005) reviewed the leading descriptor-rating studies and concluded that Holliday and Chandler’s (1986) study was the most reliable. The prototype of a wise person as portrayed by this study aligns with the findings of the current study.

As part of a larger ongoing study at Concordia University, Lyster’s (1996) dissertation conceptualized wisdom as a “perspective on life” rather than a form of intelligence or cognitive style. She aimed to contribute to our understanding of the construct of wisdom by relating standard measures of functioning to wisdom. Lyster employed a mixed-methods study approach to focus on the whole person and explored
wisdom with 78 wise nominee participants through their responses to real-life issues and dilemmas. The mean age of the 51 women and 22 men nominees who participated in the study was 69 years.

Interviews with the study’s participants were conducted over two sessions, and each session included video- or audio-taped interview questions and the administration of various test measures. The test measures assessed personality, intelligence, emotional awareness, paradigm beliefs, control beliefs, coping style, and life satisfaction, and resulted in overall wisdom scores. A sub-group of 10 of the top wisdom scorers was selected, consisting of five men and five women who were 61-79 years of age. Their videotaped interviews were transcribed for qualitative analysis.

Lyster’s (1996) qualitative data interpretation generated eight themes with related sub-themes listed in brackets: (a) interpersonal style; (b) values (humanism and generativity); (c) motivation (relationship and personal development); (d) openness (non-defensiveness, openness to emotions, ideas, and spirituality); (e) critical awareness; (f) personality integration of negative characteristics; (g) affect; and (h) experiences.

A few points salient to the present discussion emerged from Lyster’s analysis with respect to the themes and sub-themes. The interpersonal style of social unobtrusiveness as discussed by the wise participants in her study emphasized the importance of listening skills, sensitivity to others’ feelings, not offering advice unless it was requested, being aware of one’s knowledge limitations, being non-judgmental, and having a reluctance to impose one’s views on another person. The reported values held by these wise
individuals included valuing people and relationships over material possessions, as well as having a deep sense of connection to others. Lyster’s (1996) participants also reported a strong commitment to promoting the survival of future generations and the planet. This group of 10 wise participants discussed being intrinsically motivated to learn and to enjoy the learning. The theme of openness as experienced by this group included a willingness to share their experiences; they were open to revealing themselves. These wise nominees also discussed their open attitude towards emotional experience, to embracing a multiplicity of ideas, and to being open spiritually. Openness was reported to be tempered with critical reflection on problems and critical examination of one’s life history to clarify previously held beliefs and attitudes. These wise individuals also reported being aware of both their positive and negative personality characteristics and recognizing their role in taking responsibility for change. Their reported self-awareness translated into a tolerance for others’ limitations and contributed to their non-judgmental stance. Lyster’s participants reported that their emotions were critical in projecting an outward focus permitting them to connect with others. Emotions of anger and sadness were reported as being useful to overcome hurt and to being able to have compassion for those emotions in others as well as having the potential to become motivators for action. Facing ones’ fears was reported as leading to important discoveries. Some experiences reported by the participants were seen as facilitating wisdom; experiences that promoted breadth and depth of perspective.
Lyster (1996), after a complete analysis of both her quantitative and qualitative data, concluded that wisdom was a process rather than a product, and there was no “end-state” to wisdom. There was no pinnacle of wisdom perfection; “instead, the process of wisdom will be manifest in day to day experiences and in the struggle to create meaning and understanding of life” (p. 177).

The purpose of Krafcik’s (2011) dissertation was to study exemplars of wisdom. A peer-nomination process was employed to locate 20 wise exemplars. These 20 wisdom exemplars were predominantly well-educated Caucasian individuals. Their average age was 69.5 years. Most were married, and nearly all of them reported being spiritual or having a religious affiliation. The exemplars along with a control group, which was made up of the 15 nominators, completed 12 online quantitative test measures that took approximately 75-90 minutes. These 20 wise exemplars also participated in 60-90 minute semi-structured interviews that were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. The study’s interviews were designed to explore: What are exemplars’ wisdom-related qualities? What are exemplars’ lives like? What are exemplars’ opinions of wisdom? Krafcik analyzed his qualitative data in conjunction with his quantitative data and the opinions gathered from his nominators regarding what they knew of the nominees. The 12 quantitative self-report measures administered to the participants were the following: the Self-Assessed Wisdom Scale, Perceived Stress Scale, Spiritual Perspective Scale, Loyal Generativity Scale, Satisfaction With Life Scale, State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, Narcissistic Personality Inventory, Foundational
Value Scale, Big Five Inventory, Washington University Sentence Completion Test, and Humility Inventory.

Some of the significant findings that emerged from Krafcik’s (2011) findings were that “higher levels of wisdom were correlated with increases in openness, humility, and the importance of spirituality” (p. 86). Krafcik’s findings and discussion highlighted the importance of spirituality; “thirteen of 20 (65%) exemplars expressed a connection to oneness, being a part of the whole, of larger creation” (p. 127). Other reported wise exemplar qualities included honesty, compassion, intelligence, understanding, truth telling, tolerance of uncertainty, gratitude, having a sense of meaning and purpose, and being lighthearted. The exemplars were found to be “deeply engaged in life” and had meaningful relationships with loved ones. They reported having mentors in their lives and in turn acted as guides to others. The exemplars defined wisdom as arising from the unknown, as being practical, and that people were wise about different things. Krafcik’s exemplars discussed being self-aware and mindful of their own experiences. They also expressed “having a reflective articulation process in which they have access to an intuition/awareness out of which come creative and spontaneous images, words, and concepts relevant to the context” (p. 131). Krafcik summarized that exemplars of wisdom have the capacity to connect and attune with others “because they are able to see and attune within themselves first” (p. 218) and importantly “exemplars invite others to find their own path” (p. 219). Instead of advice giving, these exemplars practiced active listening and invited reflective questions when relating with others.
The studies presented in this literature review so far have mainly focused on the individual and personal wisdom. What follows next is the presentation of some literature on reflection and spirituality that are linked to personal wisdom. Before leaving this chapter, alternative theories of wisdom’s social and collective nature are presented.

**Reflection and Wisdom**

Meaning-making is a primary activity of being human (Frankl, 2006; Kegan, 1982). Clayton and Birren (1980) summarized that “all traditions described wisdom as being a type of knowledge involving a quest to understand the meaning and purpose of life” (p. 111). Humans engage in meaning-making to make sense of their daily lives. The wise participants in my former wisdom research (Taylor, 2010) clearly identified the practice of making sense of each life experience as important to them. Ardelt (2003), sociologist and wisdom researcher, tells us that:

A deeper understanding of life is only possible if one can perceive reality as it is without any major distortions. To do this, one needs to engage in reflective thinking by looking at phenomena and events from many different perspectives to develop self-awareness and self-insight. (p. 278)

The role of reflection in wisdom’s development is adeptly described by Sternberg (2013): “Experience does not create wisdom. Rather, one’s ability to profit from and utilize one’s experience in a reflective and directed way is what determines how wisdom develops” (p. 55). One particular way of engaging in reflective thinking is to embrace the theory of Transformative Learning (TL) and apply this theory to our reflections on our real-life daily experiences so as to make sense of those experiences.
Transformative Learning Theory

Dirkx (1997) tells us that “transformative learning represents a heroic struggle to wrest consciousness and knowledge from the forces of unconsciousness and ignorance” (p. 79). Using TL to transform life experiences into life lessons can help develop or aid in our meaning-making, which informs and contributes to our wise practice.

Mezirow is most often credited with developing the theory of TL (Cranton, 1998, 2006; Illeris, 2007, 2009; Jarvis, 2006, 2009; Scott, 1998). TL occurs when individuals change their views by questioning previously held assumptions, meaning schemes, or perspectives that were taken for granted and uncritically acquired through childhood. Using the adult capacity of critical reflection and bringing previously unexamined assumptions into consciousness allows for perspective transformation to take place. Early in the development of his TL theory, Mezirow (1989) claimed that, “most significant learning in adulthood takes place during transitions which often involve dilemmas not amenable to problem solving in the usual way” (p. 197). He argued that these life transitions provide opportunity for perspective transformation. Although transition periods and life dilemmas do provide learning opportunities, the learning or acquisition process for small or everyday experiences can also result in transforming individuals or their knowledge base, albeit perhaps at a slower pace. Cranton (2006) informs us that Mezirow, after his original work, acknowledged that transformative learning could result incrementally as a gradual cumulative process as well as from a single dramatic disorienting dilemma.
Cranton (2006) built on Mezirow’s (1991) work by expanding upon his three forms of reflection. Mezirow said that “reflection is the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience” (p. 104). Cranton (2006) formulated a series of 18 generic reflective questions that can be used as tools in our reflective thought processes to address the concepts of content, process, and premise, the sub-components of reflection. Mezirow (1991) originally considered TL to be solely a cognitive process. Other theorists like Dirkx (1997, 2006) and Cranton (2006, 2008) recognize that additional factors, including vision, imagination, and psychological type, play a role in the transformative process. Conscious awareness can come about in many ways. That awareness may result from a vision that interrupts our daily lives, or a book that seems to jump off the shelf at us that provides just the appropriate guidance for which we are looking, or a personal writing piece that reveals some previously hidden truth from our psyche. Our conscious awareness is made possible through a variety of mediums depending on our ability and readiness to receive.

According to Walsh (1999), regular self-reflection fosters good choices and from that, wisdom and well-being flourish. A wise nominee, Ruth, in my former research, addressed the subject of reflection when she said:

Reflection is very important on all sorts of fronts, it gives your mind a chance to generate things that wouldn’t otherwise come to you … that’s what it comes back to, reflection, you have to give your brain a little space for that because we can fill our brains with the day and everything. (Taylor, 2010, p. 67)
TL theory provides a way to structure our reflective thinking while Cranton’s (2006) 18 reflective questions help with that structure and our reflective practices. Russell (2005) indicates, however, that we cannot just tell individuals to reflect and hope for the best. That is not the way to foster reflective practices. Russell offers: “that reflective practice can and should be taught—explicitly, directly, thoughtfully and patiently—using personal reflection-in-action to interpret and improve one’s teaching of reflective practice to others” (p. 203). TL’s reflective structure is one means to assist with our reflective practices.

**Conscious Awareness**

One of the research questions that guides this research study asks participants what efforts they make to enable and enhance their abilities to perform wise acts. I anticipate the development of conscious awareness to be one of those efforts and one of the reasons I reviewed this literature here. The development of personal consciousness can lead to a better quality of life. Mostly, and often out of necessity, we live our daily lives in reactive mode dealing with what comes our way. We ordinary persons often function as survivors. We take our children to school, we go to work, we take out the garbage, and, as Hodgkiss (2001) points out, we are capable of accomplishing a great many things without being conscious of our actions; our “plane of mental life is, most of the time, on auto-pilot” (p. 10). Walsh (1999) echoes these sentiments when he says that, “in part, we are automatons meandering automatically and semiconsciously through the routines of our lives” (p. 177).
To avoid living as automatons, we could spend some of our precious gift of time to work on knowing our inner selves better. Edward, a participant in my earlier research (Taylor, 2010), professed this sentiment when he said “you have to know a lot about yourself … you have to be very self-aware in terms of your strengths and your limitations” (p. 57). As seen earlier in this chapter, Lyster’s (1996) and Krafcik’s (2011) participants also reported the importance of self-awareness.

According to Ornstein (1972), “our personal consciousness is extremely limited” (p. 17) and, due to economy, we construct our consciousness from filtered input. Hodgkiss (2001) credits the French philosopher, Henri-Louis Bergson, with identifying a process whereby the mind functions as a “reducing valve” preventing us from being overwhelmed by all perceptions. Hodgkiss (2001) also tells us “a mechanism called perceptual filtering ensures that, of all the information arriving at one’s eyes or ears at any given time, only a small proportion is actually registered and even briefly remembered” (p. 224). To protect ourselves from the barrage of daily information received by our sensory organs and to make sense of our world, we unconsciously filter and reduce irrelevant material and select what we need from our environment. Ornstein (1972) explains “our sense organs gather information which the brain can modify and sort. This heavily filtered input is compared with memory, expectations, and body movements until, finally, our consciousness is constructed as a ‘best guess’ about reality” (p. 19). The more we are aware that we are living with filtered information, the more open we become to seeing things from multiple perspectives. Heather, a wise nominee
from my Master’s research (Taylor, 2010), spoke to viewing life situations from a broader perspective when she said, “I think it’s also to do with a certain considering attitude to life perhaps, so you, not only look at situations but think about a wider context” (p. 66).

Our openness to others and their differences comes with our acceptance that we each are self-constructed, a product of our environments, cultures, experiences, and most importantly the personal lens through which we filter information. Walsh (1999) says that “perception is not a passive process but rather is an active creation, and the state of the world we perceive reflects the state of mind within us” (p. 200). To put ourselves in a position of heightened conscious awareness, which fosters our ability to perform wise acts, we need to spend time examining and reflecting on our thoughts, our actions, our behaviour, our words, our development, and our interactions with others.

Kolb (1984) asserts “the dawn of integrity comes with the acceptance of responsibility for the course of one’s own life. For in taking responsibility for the world, we are given back the power to change it” (p. 230). It may be a lofty idea to think we might change the world but we are certainly capable of changing and improving ourselves through conscious awareness.

**Spirituality and Wisdom**

The fourth theme of my first research study (Taylor, 2010) addressed spirituality (see Table 2) and found the participants sensed they were one small part of a universal whole. This concept of spiritual connectedness was also found in Lyster’s (1996) and
Krafcik’s (2011) studies that interviewed wise nominees. The participants in Lyster’s (1996) study reported having a spiritual openness, while 65% of Krafcik’s participants expressed feelings of connectedness and feeling one part of creation. From many fields, from many disciplines, the message of our connectedness exists. Not only do we hear this message from theologians and spiritual advisers. The message is presented from many perspectives.

Lorenz (1972), a mathematician, meteorologist, and founder of chaos theory, posed this question: *Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?* In a few simple words, he managed to speak volumes of the interconnectedness of all living things on our planet. Social anthropologist, Davis (2009), suggests a social web exists that envelops our planet similar to the biosphere. He calls this social web an ‘ethnosphere’ and defines it “as the sum total of all thoughts and intuitions, myths and beliefs, ideas and inspirations brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness” (p. 2). This social web can be envisioned as a tangible, malleable net engulfing and protecting our planet, holding the secrets of our cultures and evolution. It speaks to our human connectedness across time today with all living beings and our universe, yesterday through our ancestors, and tomorrow through our descendants and our evolving planet. Dewey (1967), a philosopher, psychologist, and educator, in the final paragraph of his book, *A Common Faith*, speaks to these same sentiments:

*We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize*
are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community of which we are a link. (p. 87)

Rabbi Lerner (2000) speaks of our connectedness when he says, “some people think of Spirit as the membrane that connects every part of the universe” (p. 33) and “the universe is—a vast system of cooperation” (p. 45). Thinking of our connectedness as a system of cooperation speaks to the positive aspects of our connections and interdependence. Buddhist teacher Richmond (1999) explains, “interdependence means that although we all seem to be separate, distinct people, we are deeply connected to others” (p. 190). Educator Palmer (2007) says “by spiritual I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life” (p. 5). So, from many different disciplines, we hear from scholars who speak to the essence of our connectedness and our oneness. Lerner (2000) too describes the greatest joy in life as “being able to recognize ourselves as part of the Unity of All Being …. to overcome the false consciousness that sees us as separated, lost and on our own with no higher goal than to take care of ourselves” (p. 37). Barbara, a wise nominee from my former research, spoke of wisdom and the concept of connectedness: “I think I feel wise when I experience just being a part of the whole, part of humanity” (Taylor, 2010, p. 70).

One of the central aspects of spiritual practice is to develop our connection to and place within the universe. Maureen, another wise nominee from my previous research, spoke of our connectedness and the sense of generosity that can result from that. “I think wisdom allows you to be generous because it puts your life into context, it’s grounded you, you’re part of this whole master plan … it allows you to be generous because things
are in perspective” (Taylor, 2010, p. 70). It is important if we intend or hope to act wisely that we see ourselves in relation to others. “Much of what we call spiritual practice is actually exercise in slowing and quieting the mind. It is only in this relaxed state of being that the mind is able to recognize itself as part of something larger” (Lerner, 2000, p. 274).

Prayer is one of the world’s most common spiritual practices (Richmond, 1999). Not only does prayer take us to a quiet place, but we most often begin to think of others and include others in our prayers. Paying attention and training the mind are core skills of a spiritual life (Richmond, 1999; Walsh, 1999). It is thought-provoking to link the training and quieting of our minds as an avenue to raise our own level of conscious awareness and ultimately as a means of connecting with others.

Many of the Eastern religions embrace meditation as a spiritual practice that is designed to help focus one’s attention and learn about our inner world. Concentration meditations are designed to have one focus attention on a single object, to help calm one’s mind, like concentrating on a mantra or on one’s breathing (Walsh, 1999). “A spiritual practice is not a warm-up or rehearsal but an end in itself, an activity that expresses and develops our inner life” (Richmond, 1999, p. 13). The commitment to spiritual and reflective practices indicates an adoption of a life style conducive to the development of consciousness.

Making use of time-honoured spiritual practices like prayer and meditation can help with not only knowing ourselves better but also with knowing ourselves in relation
to others and our universe. A ‘reflective presence’ results from habits that encourage a reflective state, so that one is prepared to receive “the insights or intuitions facilitative of any form of wisdom” (Osbeck & Robinson, 2005, p. 81).

**Transcendent Wisdom**

Osbeck and Robinson (2005) describe the goal of *Sophia*, philosophic or theoretical wisdom, as defined by Aristotle to be “knowledge for its own sake” (p. 74), whereas *phronesis* refers to practical wisdom. *Phronesis* is concerned with action or making the right decisions, while *sophia* is focused on contemplation (Curnow, 2011). If wisdom’s distinctions separate along lines of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *sophia* (philosophic, theoretical, or contemplative wisdom), then the majority of all the wisdom research described in this literature review would align with *phronesis*, practical wisdom.

Spiritual aspects of wisdom have been ignored to a large degree in the wisdom literature. It might seem logical to align the spiritual or religious components of wisdom under the label of *sophia* or philosophic or contemplative wisdom. However, some of the current literature refers to transcendent wisdom when referring to the spiritual aspects of wisdom (Brown, 2005; Krafick, 2011; Wink & Helson, 1997). The term transcendent wisdom is what I would prefer to use, as transcendent wisdom could be seen as fitting under the broader umbrella of *sophia*, philosophic wisdom. Regardless of the label used to address the spiritual components of wisdom, we see in studies that have engaged wise nominee exemplars that these participants identify spiritual or religious components as part of their regular daily practices and lives (Krafick, 2011; Lyster, 1996; Taylor, 2010).
Spirituality would appear to be part of the make-up of practical wisdom. The complexity and multi-dimensionality of wisdom once more becomes evident in the blurring of these lines between the traditional views of practical versus philosophic wisdom.

**Social and Collective Nature of Wisdom**

The social aspects of wisdom continue to surface in the wisdom literature, yet empirical research to date has focused mainly on the study of the attributes of the wise individual. Even studies, which involve the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm and employ real-life complex social situations to test participants’ think-aloud responses, assess only the wisdom-related knowledge of the study’s participants. Social interactions are acknowledged but are not the focus of these studies.

In his discussion of wisdom as a trait found in persons or a characteristic of communities, Brown (2005) questions whether “wisdom is not something that can ever exist except as a form of social interaction” (p. 361). Brown suggests there are four communal and societal aspects to wisdom:

1. wisdom must be developed within the context of societal relationships (parents, families, teachers, mentors, peer groups, etc.); (2) the culture of a society preserves wisdom to be passed on to younger individuals (via language usage, world view, habits of social interaction, stories, literature, frequently used proverbs and metaphors, and other cultural memes); (3) most wisdom is exercised within some form of community process; and (4) consultation with other members of a community enhances the likelihood of a wise decision. (p. 361)

Staudinger (1996) also says that “one might even argue that wisdom by definition will hardly ever be found in an individual, but rather in cultural or social-interactive products” (p. 276). She discusses the contributions of social interactions on the
development, activation, and the identification of wisdom. Staudinger argues that social interactions and social context are key factors in the ontogenesis of wisdom-related knowledge and that close relationships and friendships may be instrumental in providing wisdom-conducive experiences.

With respect to the activation of wisdom, people resolving life problems mainly report consulting with others. An empirical study conducted by Staudinger and Baltes (1995) asked 140 participants, when dealing with life problems, if they (a) thought things through on their own, (b) consulted books or media, (c) thought about how others might deal with the problem, or (d) consulted directly with other people. The participants’ highest degree of endorsement was the last option, consulting with others. Regarding the identification of wisdom, Staudinger (1996) says, “wisdom is usually attributed to others or by others, and is identified in social context” (p. 291).

Edmondson (2013), in her book chapter on the social interpretation of wisdom, reports her findings from interviews with individuals about their accounts of wise people in the west of Ireland. She says that these accounts “tend to refer first and foremost to what people could do and did for others, rather than to more internal characteristics” (p. 199). Edmondson found that what wise people mostly do is enable others to act and to bring forth change in others. She suggests that wisdom may take place “in the interpersonal space between a number of people rather than in what one or other of them does” (p. 202). She describes wisdom as a process among imperfect people and depicts wisdom in a circular diagram with a wise individual interacting with others and suggests
that wisdom resides “in processes which evolve over time and which take place not just between individuals but often in conjunction with others” (p. 205).

Edmondson (2005) explained that ethnographic approaches to studying wisdom are effective means to not only learn about the attributes of wise people but to also trace their practices in social settings. There is evidence throughout the literature that points to wisdom’s social nature. Even when we return to the early historical descriptions of wisdom, we find that Aristotle’s practical wisdom is inherently relational (Osbeck & Robinson, 2005). This study set out through a constructed social setting and a phenomenological approach to investigate the acts and practices of wise nominees.

**Summary**

This chapter traced the empirical progress made regarding the phenomenon of wisdom since the latter part of the 20th century. A mere 40 years have elapsed since the first major empirical work on this subject was documented so that the study of wisdom can still be considered in its infancy. As has been shown through this review of the literature, not many lines of wisdom research have been followed through to the point of consensus or saturation.

Studies with varying theoretical foci and methodological approaches were reviewed in this chapter; studies that inform and support the argument for the current research that collects phenomenological data from wise nominee participants in a sustained interactive environment. Krafcik (2011) and Trowbridge (2005) suggest we can learn a great deal directly from wise exemplars, which is what this study does. In studies
that have used a nomination process to locate wise nominees as study participants (Krafcik, 2011; Lyster, 1996; Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002; Orwoll, 1989; Taylor, 2010), the nominees all tend to be older individuals as is the case in the current study. Extensive and comprehensive reviews of the wisdom literature have been conducted that provide a much broader look at the examination of the phenomenon and describe in more detail many of the studies that have been briefly discussed through this literature review (Staudinger, 2008; Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Trowbridge, 2005). The majority of the research findings to date have led to no clear definition of wisdom (Birren & Svensson, 2005). However, from the studies described through this literature review, a relatively clear picture of the characteristics of a wise person are emerging as: honest, humble, respectful of all creatures, compassionate, positive, authentic, self-aware, global perspective, open, reflective, attentive listener, non-judgmental, grateful, spiritual, and having moral integrity. Holiday and Chandler’s (1986) prototype of a wise person has stood the test of time and describes in substantial detail the multi-dimensions of a wise individual.

The internal make-up of what constitutes a wise individual is mostly what has been under scrutiny over these past 40 years, whether it be intelligence, special areas of expertise, or a composition of personality dimensions. We have seen a recent delineation in the literature separating personal wisdom and intrapersonal insights, from general wisdom, which focuses on interpersonal expertise. Oser, Schenker, and Spychiger’s (1999) work has specifically examined the behaviours and actions of wise individuals.
They concluded that wisdom is situated and manifested in specific acts. Picking up that thread of the argument that wisdom is manifested in specific acts, the current study set out to specifically examine both the actions and the practices of individuals recognized as wise by their peers.
Chapter 3

A Phenomenological Approach

Merriam (2009) states, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). I am a qualitative researcher. I am not drawn to subject matters that require statistical representations; rather I am moved to listen to and discover people’s understandings of their world. I am in awe of what human beings are capable of accomplishing and for me the best way to learn is from knowledgeable others. In this study, I am specifically moved to explore the meanings that wise individuals have constructed concerning their personal experiences with wise acts, wise practices, and how these relate to wisdom.

For this qualitative research study that examines wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom I adopted a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological research approach, which is derived from the German philosophy of phenomenology, is not a singular research methodology but a family of approaches that “seek to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 19). The term phenomenology has become diluted and confusing over time because of its wide use. “Transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic phenomenology offer different nuances of focus—the essential meanings of individual experience, the social construction of group reality, and the language and structure of communication, respectively” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The family of phenomenological approaches shares
a common focus that is “on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Therefore, phenomenological data are gathered from individuals who have directly experienced a phenomenon; they have lived experience as opposed to second-hand experience of the phenomenon under study. Another shared assumption of phenomenological approaches and a defining assumption that differentiates a phenomenological approach from other forms of qualitative research is that there is an essence to the shared experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1997). van Manen, a hermeneutic phenomenologist, and Moustakas, a transcendental phenomenologist, both speak of the goal of successfully describing the essence of a phenomenon. The essence of an experience is adequately described when it “reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner” (van Manen, 1997, p. 10).

Creswell (2007) describes the main differences in the hermeneutic phenomenology of van Manen (1997) and the transcendental phenomenology of Moustakas (1994). Hermeneutic phenomenology is viewed as an interpretive process where the researcher mediates between different meanings of the lived experiences of the participants. The researcher writes descriptions based on the participants’ accounts of their experiences and reflects on the themes of those texts and interprets the meaning of the participants. Transcendental phenomenology attempts to more purely focus on creating textural and structural descriptions of the participants’ experiences, while the
researcher attempts to suspend or set aside her or his own perspective and knowledge of the subject through a concept called *epoché* or bracketing. I draw more heavily from the work of van Manen but, where appropriate, draw from the methodology of Moustakas as these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. It must be noted that van Manen (2014) acknowledges the role of *epoché*, the suspension of one’s suppositions on a subject and an opening of oneself to the world of possibilities as an important role in a phenomenological methodology. He also details the role of *reduction* that permits one to rediscover the lifeworld and the uniqueness of the phenomenon. He says “the aim of the reduction is to reachieve a direct and primitive contact with the world as we experience it or as it shows itself—rather than as we conceptualize it” (p. 220).

Patton (2002) distinguishes between a phenomenological study that focuses on descriptions of what people experience versus a phenomenological perspective that uses the philosophy of phenomenology to justify the methods used in a qualitative inquiry. He acknowledges the value of both contributions. This phenomenological study focuses on describing the experiences of nominated wise individuals who have conducted wise acts over the course of their lives. Where it is relevant to the study, I draw from the philosophical perspective underlying the methods used in the study, but my intention in dealing with a topic as broad as wisdom is not to be constrained at the outset to one phenomenological perspective but to draw on multiple perspectives as suits the multidimensional aspects of such a broad phenomenon as wisdom. The language used to describe and interpret the complexity of wisdom is extremely important. van Manen
(2014) acknowledges that, besides the requirement for sensitive interpretive skills, creative talent is required when conducting a phenomenological study:

“Phenomenological methodology in particular, is challenging since it can be argued that its method of inquiry constantly has to be invented anew and cannot be reduced to a general set of strategies or research techniques” (p. 41).

Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience, the study of essences, the attentive practice of thoughtfulness, a search for what it means to be human, and a poetizing activity (van Manen, 1984). Rather than a methodological outline, van Manen (1984, 1997, 2014) points to a dynamic interplay amongst procedural activities that should be considered when conducting phenomenological research. His procedural activities are listed in Table 3. van Manen’s (1984, 1997, 2014) Hermeneutic Phenomenological Methodology activities are aligned beside Moustakas’ (1994) Transcendental Phenomenological Methodology and Bernard and Ryan’s (2010) Steps in a Phenomenological Study. The fourth column is my modified approach to this current phenomenological study as derived from a combination of the three listed methodologies.
|---|---|---|---|
| Turn to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world  
- Formulate the question and present it in a way that teaches the reader to wonder. | First arrive at a topic and question that have both social meaning and personal significance. The question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic. The researcher’s excitement and curiosity inspire the search. | Identify a phenomenon whose essence you want to understand. | Identify a phenomenon inspired by wonder. Formulate the research questions and present them in a way that will inspire the reader to wonder. |
| Investigate experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it. Epoché (or bracketing) describes the ways we need to open ourselves to the world, free from presuppositions. Reduction is considered the principal “method” of phenomenology. It describes the gesture that permits us to rediscover the spontaneous surge of the lifeworld and the way that the phenomena give and show themselves in their uniqueness. | Prior to the interview the primary investigator engages in the Epoché process so that, to a significant degree, past associations, understandings, “facts,” biases, are set aside and do not colour or direct the interview. | Identify your biases and do as much as you can to put them aside. | Document biases in an effort to put your presuppositions aside and open yourself to the uniqueness of the phenomenon. |
| Essential criteria for selecting participants include: the research participant has experienced the phenomenon, is intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings, and is willing to participate in a lengthy interview. Typically the long interview is the method through which data are collected and utilizes open-ended comments and questions. | Collect first-hand experience narratives from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. | Collect first-hand experiences from purposefully selected research participants. Create descriptive accounts of co-researchers to situate their experiences and bring them to life for the reader. |
| Reflect on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon. | Analyzing the data includes horizontalizing the data and regarding every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value. From the horizontalized statements, the meaning or meaning units are listed. These are clustered into common categories or themes, removing overlapping and repetitive statements. | Use your now fresh (after bracketing) intuition to identify the essentials of the phenomenon. | Identify the themes that characterize the phenomenon. |
The clustered themes and meanings are used to develop the textural descriptions of the experience. From the textural descriptions, structural descriptions and an integration of textures and structures into the meanings and essences of the phenomenon are constructed.

Lay out the essentials in writing with exemplary quotes from the narratives. Lay out the themes with exemplary quotes from the collected data and create textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon.

Describe the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting. Repeat steps 4 & 5 until there is no more to learn about the lived experience of the person(s) you are studying. Describe the essence of the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.

The six steps in Taylor’s Approach to a Phenomenological Study are the following:

1. Identify a phenomenon inspired by wonder, formulate the research questions, and present them in a way that will inspire the reader to wonder;

2. Document biases in an effort to put your presuppositions aside and open yourself to the uniqueness of the phenomenon;

3. Collect first-hand experiences from purposefully selected research participants and create descriptive accounts of participants to situate their experiences and bring them to life for the reader;

4. Identify the themes that characterize the phenomenon;

5. Lay out the themes with exemplary quotes from the collected data and create explanatory descriptions that provide insight into the phenomenon; and

6. Describe the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting.

The ultimate goal of a phenomenological study is:
To produce a convincing description of what other people have experienced. It may be accompanied by an explanation but the big goal is to make readers understand the lived experience of the people you’ve studied. Doing that, like so much of good research, is a craft. (Bernard & Ryan, 2010, p. 262)

My research goal in designing this study was to allow the reader to understand the lived experiences of the study’s participants through descriptions of their wise acts, wise practices, and their understandings of wisdom. This research is designed to present, as van Manen (2014) suggests, a plausible insight into the lived experiences associated with the phenomenon of wisdom. I employed my six-step modified approach to this phenomenological inquiry. Descriptions of those six research steps follow.

Step 1: The Research Questions Based on Wonder

I would describe myself as a phenomenologist with a “questioning sensibility” (van Manen, 2002). I have maintained that questioning sensibility from the start through to the completion of this study on wisdom. I have been in awe of the subject matter well before I undertook this research. I marvel at the participants who were drawn to participate in the study and remain intrigued with their lived experiences. I have tried as much as possible to listen to their stories with openness and with a suspension of my own biases and perspectives. My interpretive descriptions of the participants’ experiences have attempted to capture the essence of their collective experiences as related to the subject matter.

It all began with my wonder at the sense of mystery that surrounds the phenomenon of wisdom. I formulated research questions based on that wonder. The five research questions that guided this doctoral research are: (a) What do wise adults describe
as wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom? b) How do wise adults describe the relationship among wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom? (c) What do wise adults think enables them to perform wise acts? (d) What efforts do wise adults make to enable and enhance their abilities to perform wise acts and to conduct their wise practices? and (e) What do wise adults experience as the impact their wise acts and practices have on others, the environment, and themselves including their own learning and the further development of their wisdom?

Step 2: Researcher’s Biases Regarding the Phenomenon

I came to this, my second study on the phenomenon of wisdom, with some accumulated information about the phenomenon. After my master’s research (Taylor, 2010), I wanted to further explore the life practices of wise nominees. My first study demonstrates that nominees’ reflective and physical practices are important components of their lives and contribute to others’ perceptions of them as wise. Those practices are in some part integral with their spiritual beliefs. I specifically wanted to explore the significance of wise practices with respect to wise acts and wisdom. Also, all of the nominees from my first study self-identified as spiritual; a surprising finding of that study. I wondered whether or not that would be a consistent finding with the wise nominees of the current study.

I also had formulated the idea that somehow a witness or witnesses played a role in the wisdom process. I had no evidence of this hypothesis other than the fact that the field often relies on the use of nominators to identify wise individuals and, throughout the
literature there are repeated references to the social implications of wisdom. None of that was clear to me but certainly made me receptive to those ideas that eventually emerged through this study.

As for my personal spiritual beliefs, I am Christian, brought up Anglican and have developed a strong belief in reincarnation. So I bring to this study an acceptance and strong belief in our human connectedness.

**Step 3: Collection of First-hand Experience Data**

The bulk of this methodology chapter is dedicated to the third step in the six-step approach I adopted for this phenomenological study. The study design, ethics, recruitment and nomination process, and securing of the study participants are all described in this phase of the research process along with the management of the collected data. This third step in the phenomenological approach concludes with the process of creating descriptive accounts of the study’s participants.

**Study Design**

This phenomenological research was designed, as van Manen (1997) suggests, to bring “into nearness that which tends to be obscure” (p. 32). This study looked to exemplars, wise adult individuals, as rich study informants whose first-hand experiences would add clarity to the interplay of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom. To this end, a group of wise individuals who live in one geographic area in Ontario were first nominated and then solicited to take part in this study. A small group of wise individuals was purposefully sought for this qualitative study—wise individuals who had
demonstrated considerable experience with and been engaged in wise act performance. According to Patton (2002), purposeful samples “offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 40).

The criteria for participation in this study involved nomination by another individual who had known the would-be-participant for more than five years and who could attest to three wise acts or three general wise behaviours demonstrated by the participant. Nominating individuals for wisdom research studies has been employed in the past (Ardelt, 2003; Baltes et al., 1995; Bluck & Glück, 2005). The tradition of nominating wise participants was employed for this study. My aim was to find six to ten wise nominees who would be willing to meet consistently as a group on multiple occasions and be willing to be interviewed before and after the group sessions. Merriam (2009) suggests the appropriate number of participants for group work is somewhere between six and ten individuals who preferably don’t know each other.

Nominations were accepted from nominators until a quorum of wise nominees had been selected. The wise nominees invited to participate in the study had to be willing and available over the four-month period, October 2013-January 2014, to participate in two one-on-one interviews of approximately 90 minutes each, and to congregate in person with the other study participants for six group discussion meetings of approximately two and a half hours each. In total, the nominees agreed to devote between 16-22 hours of their personal time to participate in this research. As a consequence, the participants all had to have significant free time to devote to this study,
and they all had to be located in a relatively small geographic region for the group meetings to work. The intention was to provide these participants multiple opportunities to interact with the other wise individuals and report on their experiences and understandings of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom.

Historically, phenomenological researchers have collected data almost exclusively via interviews. The design of this study, which includes group discussions, pushes the boundaries of the typical phenomenological research strategy. However, to get at the heart of the matter, sometimes we need to push traditional research boundaries (Horsfall & Higgs, 2011). I am convinced that we learn in community and that we are able to deepen our understanding of a subject matter by discussing and sharing our perspectives with others. This research was designed around my strong conviction that meaningful discussion opens up a space for new learning and insights. My previous wisdom research (Taylor, 2010) led me to consider the inclusion of group discussions as a valuable tool to better understand the phenomenon of wisdom. Previously, I found that participants had difficulty recalling or articulating their own learning processes. For that reason, the facilitated group discussions formed an important component of this data collection, as the group discussions had the potential to lead to new learning for the participants and offered them an opportunity to reframe former understandings. O’Donnell-Allen (2004) claims, based on the reported writings of multiple authors, that “discursive processes are the primary channel for the collaborative construction of knowledge” (p. 51). It was my intention that the group meetings and discourse opportunities would lead to new-found
knowledge for the participants concerning their past wise acts. van Manen (1997) says, “a lived experience has a certain essence, a ‘quality’ that we recognize in retrospect” (p. 36). I designed these discussions and group meetings to allow the participants a forum to share and recognize more clearly and in hindsight their wise act experiences. In a study that involved 144 participants, Wilhelmson (2006) examined the conditions and processes important for learning possibilities in small-group communications. Her study concluded, among other things, that “a dialogue meeting can become a greenhouse in which dialogue-competent behavior is practiced and fostered and thus serve as a learning environment” (pp. 254-255); and “single individuals could, through their own reflections in, as well as on, group conversation, experience personal transformative learning” (p. 243).

Qualitative data were collected from both the group discourse sessions and the one-on-one interviews. As well, written accounts prepared by the participants in advance of group meetings were both shared during the group meetings and collected as data sources with the permission of the participants. During the group sessions, I encouraged the study’s wise nominees to participate in drawing activities mostly as a means to stimulate reflection and discussion. Their drawings formed part of the collected data. This combination of group discussions, interviews, writing assignments, and drawing assignments was designed to create sufficient data to fully address the study’s research questions.
Ethics

In advance of participant recruitment and the commencement of data collection, ethics clearance was obtained from the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) of Queen’s University for this study (see Appendix G).

Recruitment and Nomination Process

The nomination process was complex and time consuming. It extended over a three and a half month period, August 1, 2013 – November 15, 2013. Early into the recruitment process for nominees, my research study was announced on CBC Radio One, which provided credence to the study and a starting point for discussion with potential nominators. Besides the radio announcement, I distributed in various public places recruitment posters (see Appendix A) calling for nominations in one geographic area in Ontario (e.g., the City Court House, a local Community College and University, a local hospital, and the City Hall). I sought nominations mainly from individuals employed or formerly employed in professions that deal with the public and are considered wisdom-facilitative, such as teaching, civic leadership, and counselling (Baltes & Staudinger, 1993; Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002). Recruitment notices were posted in institutions where such individuals were likely to be employed. To reach a broad spectrum of the public, I also placed posters in various community centres (e.g., a Seniors Centre, a Spirituality Centre, the YMCA, multiple libraries, a native Friendship Centre, multiple churches, and a learning centre). Also, I contacted many community leaders directly sharing information about the study, e-mailing or passing out recruitment posters,
and soliciting nominations (e.g., learning centre leaders, religious and spiritual leaders, and community leaders such as the executive director of the local United Way).

Nominators were asked to nominate one or more wise individuals from the general community whom they had known for more than five years personally or professionally. This study relied on the nominator’s implicit understandings of what wise meant to them. Rigorous information was collected during the nomination process from the nominator concerning the nominee’s history of wise action and behaviour. Only those individuals who received strong nominator endorsements were approached as potential study participants.

The nominators were asked to e-mail their nominations to a g-mail account, specifically set up for the purpose of contacting the researcher, or to telephone the number indicated on the recruitment poster. I asked prospective nominators to answer questions concerning their nominee either over the phone or to complete a questionnaire e-mailed to them (see Appendix B). In particular, I asked nominators to describe three wise acts or behaviours they personally had witnessed performed by their nominee and potential study participant. I distributed nomination forms either manually or via e-mail to individuals who responded to the recruitment process and wished to nominate a wise individual for the study. I asked nominators to obtain verbal consent from their nominee so that I could contact the nominee directly with information about the study and to determine his or her willingness to participate in the study. For purposes of confidentiality, I did not inform the nominators whether or not their nominee candidate
agreed or was accepted for participation in the study. Once I secured eight wise nominees as study participants, the nomination process was closed.

**Securing Study Participants**

Eight individuals were nominated for this study because of their witnessed actions and behaviours. The nominators were required to obtain permission from the nominees that allowed me to contact them with information about the study. The prospective nominees and I either met in person or over the phone and engaged in an information exchange about the study. Letters of Information (see Appendix C) and Consent Forms (see Appendix D) were distributed to prospective study participants. Prospective participants were given three to seven days to digest the information that was provided to them in the Letter of Information and Consent Form. I pre-arranged a telephone call-back time with each prospective participant to determine if she or he were willing to participate in the study. If a prospective participant with a strong nominator endorsement offered to devote his or her time to this research process, they were accepted to participate in the study. This study’s nominators were all active leaders and participants in their communities. They had long-term relationships with their nominees and provided detailed information about their nominees’ wise actions and behaviours. They considered their nominees wise individuals and I relied on these peer nominations. I scheduled a one-on-one interview and an agreement was made to collect the participant’s signed Consent Form at that first interview session. I collected all signed Consent Forms in advance of conducting the first interviews with the wise nominees.
Originally I hoped that by approaching and including as many different ethnic organizations and individuals in the selected geographic area during the nomination process, I would procure a relatively diverse group of participants (diverse in age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and education) for the study. However, those willing to participate appeared on the surface to be fairly homogeneous. The research design, which asked participants to devote a combined total of 16-22 hours of interviews, group meetings, and writing time, inevitably excluded participants with fixed time commitments. As it turned out, all eight participants were retired or semi-retired from professional life; however, their ages spanned four life decades. They ranged in age from 62-93 years of age. This age range for nominated wise individuals is typically found in the wisdom research literature. Most laypeople nominate individuals as wise who are at least 60 years of age (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). The study did manage to attract participants of both genders. Three males and five females agreed to participate in the study, and, although all participants were white, they were of varying ethnicities. All participants were well-educated and declared themselves to be either spiritual or religious, although they followed a variety of differing religious or spiritual practices.

One participant said of this group:

I was impressed with the diversity of backgrounds even though we really got male and female, all white, all of a certain age. Still, there was such a richness of experience that became focused on this issue. So, that sort of impressed me. (Harold)

What impressed me about this group of participants was their commitment to the process. For every group discussion session they arrived eager and prepared, sometimes with a
little homework and sometimes just prepared in spirit. They were all present and ready to contribute. The depth of their insights, their openness to others’ opinions, and their willingness to share their own experiences exceeded my research expectations. The participants reported that their curiosity and desire to learn about wisdom were factors in their decision to participate in this research.

**The Data**

I collected data via (a) audio-recorded and transcribed interviews, (b) a series of six audio-recorded and transcribed group discussion meetings, (c) writing pieces and drawings by the participants, and (d) my field notes and reflections. The timing of the data collection is outlined in Table 4.

**Table 4: Data Collection Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethics Clearance</td>
<td>July 16, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locate and phone interview nominators and obtain consent and nominee suggestions</td>
<td>August 1 – November 15, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locate and obtain nominee participants, obtain consent and participation agreement</td>
<td>August 15 – November 15, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct first interviews with nominees</td>
<td>October 15 – November 15, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct second interviews with nominees</td>
<td>January 16 – January 31, 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interviews.** I conducted two in-depth and semi-structured interviews of approximately 90 minutes with each participant before and after the group meetings. The first interview (see Appendix H) was designed to obtain a focused life history of each participant, while the second interview (see Appendix I) allowed the participants “to reflect on the meaning of their experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 18). The participants were
offered an opportunity during the second interview to voice any thoughts they had yet to share on the topic of wise acts, wise practices, or wisdom. This second interview also allowed me to clarify any issues that the participants had brought forward during their previous interview or the group discussions, and to ask what they had learned through the process of the group discussions.

**Themed group discussions.** The group meetings served as an extended opportunity for participants to meet, discuss, and share their stories and experiences of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom. Phenomenological interviewing “focuses on the deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 148). My previous master’s research (Taylor, 2010) demonstrated that it is extremely difficult for individuals to report on their cognitive processes associated with wisdom. To overcome this difficulty, I asked the wise nominees to participate in six facilitated group discussion meetings that I designed to inspire and solicit the participants’ metacognitive recall about past experiences and their understanding of the phenomenon of wisdom through guided discussions, story-telling, and activities (see Appendix J). The participants’ opinions and shared lived experiences informed the direction and topic decisions of each ensuing group discussion. The study evolved from the participants’ input and, as a result, the study truly can claim to be of an emergent design. It was evident from the comments shared by the participants in their final interviews that new learning had occurred for them through the group discussion process. Like the interviews, the group meetings were recorded in their totality and transcribed verbatim with the
permission of the participants. A professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix K) was employed to transcribe verbatim the audio interview and group discussion files into Word documents.

Our first group discussion meeting took place on November 22, 2013. This group of eight individuals, nominated for their wise actions, who agreed to come together, devote their time, and discuss the subject of wisdom, finally, after months of organizing, sat facing one another around a large gray modular table in a rather sparse closed meeting room in a public library. A few knew of each other because of their community work but, for the most part, these individuals were strangers to each other.

Small recording devices sat in the middle of the table to pick up every voice inflexion and every nuance of our conversation. I had assembled a side table with tea, juice, and snacks ready for anyone who needed to get up and move about. And so we began on that cool fall day to talk about wisdom and to build a bond of friendship through respectful dialogue. We began with all members introducing themselves and telling a little of their life history. I shared with the participants some of the things they had told me during their one-on-one interviews such as why they were interested in participating in the study and what they hoped would be discussed during our meetings. I spoke a little about my phenomenological approach to this qualitative research and then we got to work.

The first session as described above was designed to allow the participants to meet each other, introduce themselves, and begin sharing their understandings of wisdom
through a planned group activity. I asked the participants to make a selection of a few pictures that spoke to them of wisdom from an array of many prints. The participants shared why they had made their selections. Our second group meeting aimed to inspire discussions and to collect data about the participants’ life practices. We also watched videos and shared stories of wise exemplars, pre-selected by the participants, like Nelson Mandela.

Prior to our third group gathering, which focused on wise actions, the participants were asked to prepare in writing a story of an incident in their life that they believed could be considered a wise act. Besides sharing their prepared stories of wise acts, I engaged the participants in a drawing exercise they appeared to enjoy. That drawing exercise had them sequence some of the significant events of their lives and then to position their shared wise act on their life timeline.

The fourth group session focused on what the participants felt enabled their wise actions. The fifth session explored the participants’ understandings of the relationships of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom. They read Yang’s (2013) article “From Personal Striving to Positive Influence: Exploring Wisdom in Real-Life Contexts” prior to our fifth meeting. The article was used as a jumping off point to encourage discussion about wisdom in general, which led to explorations of its relationship with wise acts and practices. The participants were asked to draw diagrams of how they pictured the development of wisdom.
During our last group session, I led an activity that had the participants select a hidden word from an assortment of folded cards. The participants spoke to each selected word for as long or as short as they chose before passing the card along. The words discussed were choice, connection, consciousness, transformation, spirituality, and artistry.

Video and audio clips were used throughout the group sessions along with a selection of art works and prints. As well, drawing activities that kept the participants engaged and committed to the data collection period were employed. A detailed account of these group sessions along with the resources used during our group discussion sessions can be found in Appendix J.

The amount of time this group of wise nominees dedicated to the group discussions allowed not only for the participants to become comfortable with each other but to have sufficient time to discuss the topic areas in depth. The six group discussions were scheduled weeks apart from each other, providing the participants ample time to digest the information discussed during prior sessions and to think about the subject matters that would be discussed in the next session. At the end of each group meeting, I informed the participants about what to expect at our next meeting and, in many cases, they were asked to prepare something in writing as a means of reflecting on their experience in advance of our next meeting. These highly motivated individuals did their homework, and this study was enriched not only by each of the participant’s approximate
20 hours of allocated discussion and interview time but also by their thinking between sessions.

**Writing pieces.** In addition to the qualitative data described above, reflective writing pieces were submitted by some of the study participants. These writing pieces and their drawings served as data sources with permission of the participants. Originally, the participants were asked to set aside two to four hours of reflective writing time to prepare for interviews and group meetings.

**Drawings.** Three art activities were used during the group discussion sessions to engage the participants and get them thinking and talking. The first activity had the participants choose one or two pictures that spoke to them of wisdom from a large selection of 8.5 X 11 coloured photographs and art prints. The second activity was a drawing activity. I asked the participants to do an adaption of “The River of Life” exercise—a sequential pictogram of one’s life events. I provided each group member with a blank diagram of a river. They were asked to draw the significant positive events of their life along one bank of the river and the significant negative life events on the opposite shore of the river. The participants positioned with an X where, over the course of their life, the wise act had occurred that they chose to share with the group. The third activity involved the participants drawing on large paper their vision of the development of wisdom. The selected prints, the chart of their significant life events, and the participants’ drawings of the development of wisdom formed part of the study data.
**Researcher’s field notes and reflections.** Throughout the study period that included the design, data collection, analysis, and writing phases, I maintained field notes, wrote reflections, and engaged at times in free writing sessions to help sort out my writing blocks and my personal feelings about the findings. My field notes and private reflective writing pieces were instrumental tools during the analysis phase of the study, the formulation of the final discussion chapter, and my writing and completion of this thesis. These private notes formed an integral part of the study’s data.

**Data Management**

I took every effort to secure the research data and keep the identity of the study participants confidential. Although I knew the participants’ names, pseudonyms were assigned to participants prior to data analysis and prior to the supervisory committee’s access to the data. Only pseudonyms will be used in any future publications that result from this research. The participants were cautioned on multiple occasions not to discuss what was said during the group meetings with outside individuals, and this statement was included in the consent forms the participants signed before taking part in the study. As well, Nominators agreed to keep their nominations confidential through a statement on the Nominator Questionnaire Form (see Appendix B). Standard security measures as approved by Queen’s General Research Ethics Board have been employed to secure the study data. I will retain the data for a five-year period in locked filing cabinets in my home office and, during use, the data are secured on my password protected computer. After the five-year retention period, I will destroy all of the original data files.
Descriptive Accounts of Participants

The analysis phase of the study began with my reading, re-reading, and listening to the data. It became clear to me how each participant’s voice and opinion was distinctive. I felt it was extremely important that the study’s readers become familiar with each wise nominee participant so that the reader could better know and weigh each of the participant’s words. The eight nominated participants are briefly presented in Table 5. Their pseudonyms, an assigned title approved by the participants to succinctly and descriptively identify them, their gender, age, marital status, number of children and grandchildren, as well as their religious or spiritual affiliations are summarized in the table.

Table 5: The Eight Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children &amp; Grand &amp; Great Grand Children</th>
<th>Religious/ Spiritual Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allen</td>
<td>The Voyageur</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5/7/4</td>
<td>Order of Benedictine Monks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>The Community Developer</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2/6</td>
<td>Values Driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>The Gardener</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2/0</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>The Naturalist Professor</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1/4</td>
<td>Quaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachael</td>
<td>The Art Therapist</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>3/2</td>
<td>United</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>The Trustee</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2/1</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tessa</td>
<td>The Social Activist</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2/2</td>
<td>Unitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vera</td>
<td>The Writer</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3/2</td>
<td>Unitarian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I took it upon myself to write brief life histories of each participant and those, along with some of the shared attributes and behaviours of the study’s wise nominees, are presented in Chapter 4. The writing of these descriptive accounts, designed to situate the participants’ life experiences and bring them to life for the reader, overlapped with the theme identification phase of the research.

**Step 4: Theme Identification**

An interested colleague at one point asked me during the analysis phase of this research how my research was proceeding. I poured out my woes of how I was trying so hard to make sense of the data and identify the themes. His knowing response was “so you are in the mucking about phase.” I truly was in the mucking about phase for as long as it took to complete the writing of the four findings chapters and successfully identify the study’s themes. The themes became clear as I wrote.

**Data Organization and Interpretation**

Rehorick and Bentz (2008) tell us that “phenomenology is a return to direct experience as a source of knowledge” (p. 6). This study collected direct experience data from the wise nominee participants through our group discussions and interviews. The data were analyzed as collected, which allowed for multiple opportunities to go back and forth with the participants to clarify meanings. van Manen (1997) says, “the insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience” (p.
As suggested by van Manen (2002), I was attentive to the participants’ voices and the subtleties of their words. I constantly asked for clarifications as the study proceeded.

Originally I used NVIVO 10 to help me organize and manage the data. The six group discussions of approximately two and a half hours in length each and the 16 interviews of approximately 90 minutes each were organized with the help of NVIVO 10 into 158 codes. To manage such an unwieldy number of codes, I attempted to group like codes together into categories such as wisdom characteristics (humility, confidence, etc.), actions (ability, enabling, etc.), spirituality (meditation, quiet, mindfulness, etc.), and thinking (learning, questioning, etc.). I found many of the original codes could fit into more than one category and, for this reason, this grouping exercise did not prove extremely useful. I subsequently attempted to organize the codes into other structures, such as the five original research questions, and then the four life management practices I had previously found through my Master’s research (Taylor, 2010). As I tried to think of the current data via those past four research groupings, I could find some relevance but another way of viewing those past data emerged for me, shifting my emphasis on how I viewed the life management practices. What made most sense in the end was to regard the data via the three main subject areas wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom.

I returned to examining the original data from the storied viewpoints of each participant per subject area. At this point, I felt that all my time coding the data into NVIVO 10 was wasted but, as my analysis and writing continued, I found it very useful to be able to locate and access the data quickly via the NVIVO 10 codes. Moustakas
(1994) suggests that the organization and analysis of the data needs to regard every horizon, every statement or question as having equal value. This study’s data were indeed regarded from every possible angle.

Once I had decided to regard the data as three distinct subject areas, it felt almost like I was analyzing three sets of data. For each data set, I went back to the original data, and employed inductive analysis and the method of constant comparison while reading and rereading to filter the data and get at the essence of the meanings that emerged. Phenomenological research distinguishes between the appearance of an experience and the essence of an experience (van Manen, 1984). My aim constantly was to grasp the essence of what the study’s wise nominees were saying. I interpreted the data as carefully as possible, listening for the intent of the participants, while attempting to suspend my personal perspectives. All the while, I recognized that the descriptions I was creating could not possibly exhaust the human experience of wise acts, wise practices, or wisdom. van Manen (1984) said, “a phenomenological description is always one interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially richer, description” (p. 40).

This phase of my research process was so closely tied with Step 5: Lay Out the Themes with Exemplary Quotes that I was not completely comfortable with the theme identification until all four of the findings chapters were written. The themes summarized in Table 6 eventually emerged as I progressed through the process of finding exemplary quotes and interpreting and making sense of the data.
Table 6: Patterns and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patterns</th>
<th>Wise Practice Themes</th>
<th>Wise Act Themes</th>
<th>Wisdom Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pattern 1: Self</td>
<td>• Quiet Reflective Practices: Minding the Mind (meditation, prayer, centering, reflections)</td>
<td>• Confidence</td>
<td>• Authenticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Physical Practices: Minding the Body (daily exercise, canoeing, walking, cycling, skiing, dancing, etc.)</td>
<td>• Learning and Transformation</td>
<td>• Wholeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Intention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Intuition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Authenticity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Wholeness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern 2: Self-in-Relation-to-Other</td>
<td>• Connecting-with-Other Practices: Feeding the Soul (communing with nature, time with family and friends, writing, prayers for others)</td>
<td>• Liking/loving Others</td>
<td>• Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Listening</td>
<td>• Shared Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Impact</td>
<td>• Spirituality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 5: Lay Out the Themes with Exemplary Quotations

Bernard and Ryan (2010) indicate it is the role of the researcher to select quotes that create a convincing description of what is experienced by those being studied and that this step requires “the researcher achieve empathic understanding of the phenomenon being studied” (p. 260). To go about the process of gaining an empathic understanding of the phenomenon of wisdom with its associated wise acts and wise practices during data collection, I (a) first invited the participants to share their experiences, (b) probed for deeper understandings, (c) waited respectively through pauses in our conversations when I felt a participant had more to say, and (d) remained interested in everything the
participants had to say. I dug back through the data to appropriately quote the participants’ experiences using the most meaningful quotes from the data and then I wrote around the quotes. I let the participants’ own words tell the story.

Rehorick and Bentz (2008) declare that “the phenomenologist seeks to describe experience in direct and unclouded ways” (p. 24). This is the approach I took while writing and describing the stories and experiences of this study’s wise nominees. Todres and Galvin (2008) speak of a new phenomenological approach titled aesthetic phenomenology that incorporates into the writing evocative and poetic forms of expression. It is about finding the words that address not only the cognitive meaning of the lived experience of the participants but also finding the words that evoke the emotions associated with the experience “the aliveness of the meanings” (p. 577). These authors describe aesthetic phenomenology as appealing to the heart and also to the head. I made every effort to honour the storied details of the study’s participants, bringing to life the meanings behind their experiences.

**Step 6: Write and Re-write to Describe the Phenomenon**

van Manen (1984, 1997) speaks of the complex process of writing and rewriting, an integral part of phenomenological research, that most often involves re-thinking, reflecting, and re-cognizing to make sense of the parts so that a deep and comprehensive description of the lived experience is created. This study proved to be all about the writing. Through many slow and long iterations, the study’s findings finally revealed themselves through the writing and rewriting. I made sense of the study’s data as I (a)
organized the quotes associated with the study’s themes, (b) used free writing to work through writing blocks and my meaning making, and (c) explored what I wanted to say in the final discussion chapter. In the end, through my writing, I was able to work out for myself the essence of the phenomenon of wisdom. It was not an easy process as I worked through a paradigm shift in my thinking about wisdom’s construction.

My paradigm shift did not happen overnight. I had set out on this journey to explore wisdom as a personal construct. I began that process by exploring the actions and practices of this study’s wise nominees in the rather unique manner as described through this chapter. Writing the descriptions of the participants and the study’s findings into themes and patterns was slow and conscientious work but it wasn’t until I tried to make sense of the whole by presenting the study’s conclusions that I was driven back to re-read, re-examine, and re-write about my data. My analysis kept bringing forth the social aspects of wisdom. I was compelled to re-examine the literature for evidence of wisdom’s social nature and I found it buried in so many of the studies I had already examined. As I began to re-interpret my findings with a social lens, the conclusions of the study unfolded as I attempted to write what I found in the data as opposed to what I expected to find in the data. A paradigm shift regarding wisdom’s social nature happened for me and I share that understanding with the reader in the final discussion chapter.

**Study Limitations**

The very structure of this study, the group discussion sessions, limited the participant sample size. Facilitating a larger group would have proved difficult and likely
not allowed each participant’s voice to be so clearly heard in each group session. Not only did the study’s structure limit the feasibility of a larger sample size but it also in part dictated the age of the participants who were available for the study. The many required hours of group work likely restricted younger adults’ participation as their busy lives and commitments would not make them available for such an undertaking. However, it must be noted that most people nominated as wise for other research studies are also at least 60 years of age (Baltes et al., 1995; Denney et al., 1995; Jason et al., 2001, Staudinger & Glück, 2011). It is possible that our Western perspective, which dictates our perception of wisdom as being the domain of elders, has partly contributed to the nomination of older individuals as wise.

The study’s eight wise individuals were all white middle-class individuals. For that reason, this rather homogenous group cannot be seen as providing a broad spectrum of perspectives other than what these wise individuals have accumulated over their long lives. My efforts to solicit nominations from diverse cultural communities, which included approaching multiple community centres and seeking nominations from various cultural groups, could not dictate who in the end was nominated. I would have liked more diversity in the final study sample but that diversity was beyond my control. The ethnicity of the group can be partly attributed to the demographics of the geographic area where this study was conducted in southern Ontario. The population of this area is not particularly diverse. It is made up of 90.8% White individuals with the Aboriginal and
visible minority populations comprising the remaining 9.2% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2006).

This study’s group discussion design, although successful in this circumstance, could have given rise to a negative group dynamic. In some focus groups where individuals are brought together for a few hours to render their knowledgeable opinions on a specific subject, there can be concerns about a group dynamic that might influence the quality of the data collected. Power positions or political posturing may influence the data results. That did not prove to be the case with this group of wise nominees. This group of equals had the opportunity to come together on multiple occasions and build a community of trust. There was no evidence of a negative group dynamic that might have caused a concern. Rather, I found the group interaction capitalized on the synergy of the group, which fit with Carey and Asbury’s (2012) perspective that the whole group often produces more than the sum of its individual parts, as the members have the opportunity to question each other about the specifics of the subject matter during the data collection period. This particular group of individuals, who at their core respect others and are open to receiving others’ perspectives, did an admirable job of discussing the subject matter and allocating time for all participants to offer their opinions in their own way. I asked one of the participants, Vera, what she learned from the group at the end of the data collection period. She replied:

It’s an incredible group of people and everyone had a different kind of life and different expertise. You knew that they didn’t always think the same way. There were differences of opinion and that was good. In fact you learn more from listening to people who don’t think the way you do than you ever would from
people who think the same as you do. We did have the common thread of wisdom to think about and I just found that the way people dealt with that topic was interesting; they were not all the same…. There was a great deal of respect for each other. I think you can respect people that have different ideas than you do.

Chapter Summary

I modified former approaches to phenomenological studies and adopted a six-step process that worked for this study. I diligently adhered to this format throughout this study. The group discussion design along with the one-on-one interviews to collect data did push the boundaries of traditional phenomenological inquiry. However, for this complex subject matter, this structure provided the participants the benefit of learning from each other’s experiences while providing them with time to reflect on their own experiences. This approach could be considered another in the family of research techniques employed in phenomenological inquiry. These wise nominees willingly shared their understandings, life histories, and narratives of their experiences with wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom. The findings are organized and reported in the following four chapters.
Chapter 4

Findings: Eight Wisdom Profiles and Understandings of Wisdom

This chapter is one of four that report the results of the data analysis and findings of this study. These chapters are intended to provide a coherent account of the participants’ understandings and experiences with this subject matter but, as I begin to present the study’s findings, I am worried. I am worried that as the interpreter of these trusted data I will not do justice to the participants’ words and meanings. It is my intention to honour what the participants offer up as data through this research process but, I am equally aware that I carry with me my own understandings on the subjects of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom. These understandings as much as I try to suspend them are coloured by my personal life history, my world view, and my academic learnings about wisdom and its components. Add to that, I have been reading and rereading these data endlessly. Probably at this point, I know the words of my participants better than they do. They said them once. I have read and listened to their words dozens of times as I have been engaged in the analysis phase of this research—digesting, processing, and interpreting their individual words as a melded set. I have made every attempt to hear their individual voices clearly enough to present their findings as a unified whole in this chapter and yet I wonder if it has been enough. As a phenomenologist, I have found comfort in the words of van Manen (2002) who explains that “all interpretive phenomenological inquiry is cognizant of the realization that no interpretation is ever complete, no explication of meaning is ever final, no insight is
beyond challenge” (p. 7). So through these four findings chapters I invite the reader into the process of making sense of the collective data of the study’s wise nominees. A native traditional story opens this chapter as a means of introduction to the study’s eight participants.

**Seven Grandfathers Plus One**

Ojibway tradition tells us that the Creator gave responsibility to Seven Grandfathers to watch over the Earth’s people (Benton-Banai, 1988). These Seven Grandfathers were powerful spirits who recognized that life was not good for the Earth’s people. To help remedy that situation and make life better, the Grandfathers sent a Helper to search for just one person who could be taught to live in harmony with the Creator and who would be able to pass along that knowledge to others. After seven years of searching, the Helper found and brought to the Seven Grandfathers a new-born boy child. The Grandfathers decided the boy was too young and too weak yet to learn from them, so they charged the Helper to first take the baby away and educate him about all of Creation, to take him to all Four Quarters of the Universe. After seven years of exploring the Four Quarters of the Universe, the young boy and Helper returned to the lodge of the Seven Grandfathers. It was then the Grandfathers could see that the boy was stronger and ready to receive their teachings. They invited him into their lodge, and each Grandfather passed along one teaching the boy was to share with the Earth’s people. The boy then began his long journey home but by the time he reached home, he had become an old man. Only
then was he able to pass along the Grandfathers’ teachings to the Earth’s people, which taught them how to live in harmony with all of Creation.

This story, new to me, was brought to my attention by Harold, one of this study’s participants. In my last interview with Harold, I asked if he believed the other participants were wise. He replied in this way, “I felt like I was among the Seven Grandfathers. It’s a metaphor for the group that we had gathered” (the study’s group of wise nominees was composed of both female and male participants). So the story of the Seven Grandfathers was introduced to me as it related to this study’s research participants.

I asked all of the eight participants during their second one-on-one interviews at the end of the study, after the group of eight had come to know each other quite well through our multiple group discussion sessions, if they believed the other seven participants were wise. I chose to ask this question because, at the outset of the study, none of the participants acknowledged that he or she was wise. They acquiesced that their nominators had recognized them as wise, which encouraged them to participate in the study but Allen said, when his nominator suggested that he was a wise man, “I spent about five minutes trying to convince them I wasn’t.” Harold said, “I have no self-consciousness or self-awareness of being wise.” Interestingly, none of the participants saw herself or himself as wise yet each acknowledged the other group members as wise individuals. Vera said, “Right now I feel that everybody else is really wise, but I’m still not sure about myself,” while Stephen said, “I think I was kind of riding on the coat-tails of some of the other people there. I mean, I was a little out of my league with their
experiences—the things they’ve done!” Humility was definitely present in all of these participants.

We return to the story of the Seven Grandfathers and their teachings at the end of Chapter 7 to hear, reported in their own words, how the participants in this study live some of the seven Grandfather teachings. Before we return to those teachings, the analysis segment of this dissertation, which spans four chapters, begins with descriptive introductory profiles of the eight wise nominees who devoted their time to this study—five females and three males, 62-93 years of age. These profiles were created after I spent some 20 hours with each participant conducting our interviews and group discussions, and then re-listening to the taped audio recordings and re-reading our transcripts. The profiles were designed to provide an understanding of the calibre of individuals who both met the research requirements of a wise nominee for this study and were interested enough in this subject to commit many hours of their time to this research process. Their profiles are intended to encapsulate the essence of each individual rather than recount all the events of their lives. Not only have the participants been assigned a pseudonym, but they have also been allocated a pseudo-title that captures a distinguishing element of their lives, speaks to their personal interests, and describes how others see them.

**Allen – The Voyageur**

A magnificent raconteur and yet personally shy, Allen’s many accomplishments were gradually revealed to the group as he humbly shared some of his life experiences. Born in Scotland, Allen immigrated to Canada in the mid-1950s with his new bride when
he was in his twenties. After a few years of working for newspapers, first as a reporter and then as an editor, Allen got back to lab work, a love he had developed back in Scotland after the war. His lab research work and interest in microbiology led him to begin his formal education, something he had put aside after quitting high school at the age of 13 to work as a telegram boy in Scotland. Allen acquired a BSc in Chemistry and, when a job as a medical editor for a pharmaceutical company was posted, he moved his young growing family from one province to another. After five years in the pharmaceutical industry, he found himself in charge of the research department at his company and his corporate responsibilities, which included disseminating grants, created connections for him at the local universities. While continuing his pharmaceutical work, he studied part-time at two separate universities completing both a Masters in Microbiology and a PhD in Experimental Medicine all the while growing and raising his family. After receiving a PhD, Allen taught for the rest of his career as a professor of pharmacology working in two provinces before retiring.

At the age of 83, after 60 years of marriage, five children, seven grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren, Allen can claim many interests keep him in touch with the natural world and his spiritual and physical self. Allen is a sailor, avid canoeist, pilot, cyclist, and published author who practices Christian meditation. An acknowledged and award winning scholar during his working career, some of Allen’s most remarkable accomplishments have been achieved after retirement. He cycled the Pyrenees and, beginning at the age of 60 and over 5 summers, Allen began retracing the canoe voyages
of a notable fur trader traversing 14,000 km of Canadian northern waterways in a canoe completely on his own.

Allen’s nominator, who had known him for 11 years, wrote that Allen is philosophical and grateful, that he has survived the deaths of two adult children and still is able to have a positive attitude towards life, and that he is able to laugh at himself. Allen’s captivating stories that often centre around his early years growing up as a “blitz kid” during WWII or the sometimes harrowing experiences gained on his later life canoe voyages are a mix of an examination of the lighter side of life with the sentiment and harshness that life often brings—a testament to the words of his nominator. When speaking of his canoe voyages, and in what could be considered an analogy for life, Allen said, “you have beautiful and magnificent days but then other times you have days when there is just tremendous struggle.”

**Anne – The Community Developer**

At 68 Anne can look back at a long career of serving her community. First she worked as a primary school teacher and then for 30 years grew and administered a not-for-profit organization focused on developing adult literacy skills. She was acknowledged for her long-term service commitment when awarded the Governor General’s Diamond Jubilee medal for service to Canada.

Anne’s nomination for this study was made by a colleague who had worked with her for 21 years in their not-for-profit organization and who credited Anne with being someone who was very non-judgmental, who never revealed anger or frustration, who
always saw the best in people, and who could step back to allow others to be creative and productive. Anne’s words reveal this character: “You have to give people opportunity to demonstrate their talent. So you know all good things can’t come from you. You have to give the opportunity to others and then everyone flourishes that way.” But it’s not Anne’s working career or her ability as a leader in the not-for-profit sector that defines her; it is Anne’s appreciation of and commitment to her family that speaks to her essence.

Married for 40 years, Anne along with her husband is actively involved in the lives of their two grown children and six grandchildren. Anne’s parents, both in their nineties are still alive and well, although living on the other side of the continent, which means frequent trips for Anne back to her original home base to occasionally take care of her aging parents. She credits her good fortune in part to “just having a very stable home.”

Deborah – The Gardener

Deborah lives with her husband of over 40 years in a beautiful rural farm-house surrounded by quiet space and flourishing, working gardens developed over decades by these city-to-country transplants. For the past 17 years, Deborah and her husband have invited people to come into their gardens in August to sit, to meander, or to cut flowers for take away. She calls this their gardening and giving program, a program that grows flowers and grows awareness of hospice care.

Deborah’s long winding career and many interests have led her to this place of developing working gardens; it fits with her natural creative inclination to do “things that
help people come to know themselves better.” From her teen counsellor-in-training and swimming coach summer jobs, Deborah’s working life after obtaining a Bachelor of Physical and Health Education and a teaching degree has had many twists and turns and yet a thread of continuity is visibly woven into her many jobs. She has taught Physical and Health Education at the high school level, partnered in opening and operating a store that promoted the arts, worked in a volunteer capacity to start a local community school, became a photo researcher and then gardening editor for a national Canadian magazine, became an entrepreneur, consulted on the creation and maintenance of gardens, returned to teaching high school, and culminated her professional life as a university career education counsellor where she said of her work: “I believe in the growth of people not in finding them a job, not in doing their résumé for them but in helping them grow as a person.”

Deborah’s emphasis on well-being and growth has been fostered through her education, her work, and her life experiences. At 65 with two grown children, Deborah took early retirement three years ago but continues to be involved with projects that promote healthy and fulfilled living. In learning from many friends and family who have faced life-threatening illnesses, and through her own experience with breast cancer, Deborah’s centering work on giving gardens speaks of her commitment to the triad of creativity, well-being, and growth.
Harold – The Naturalist Professor

Upon Harold’s retirement from his professional teaching career, Harold’s wife of 57 years asked when she could retire from her household duties. His response “you cooked for the last 35 years and have run the household and if you want to retire from that, I’ll do that.” This, one can assume, is part of the reason for the success of his long-term marriage. Although, as he confessed to our group, his wife took back the laundry after two days, he is still in charge of meals. A family man, a faith practitioner, a biologist, an ecologist, an educator of educators, a professor of outdoor education, and now a cook, Harold at 82 years of age is a busy man in his retirement. Five or six years into his retirement he discovered the Quaker faith. Although religion has been an ongoing and important part of his whole life, Harold is now a practicing Quaker, registered in Ontario as a “Minister of Religion.” The father of one, Harold is the grandfather of four.

Harold holds a Master’s degree in Science and, after 24 years of work as a professor at a university, he comes across very much today still as the professor. His specialization was in Outdoor Experiential Education, which he married with his spiritual philosophy. Harold’s love of nature and spiritual connection with it can be found in these words shared during a group discussion:

I’ve had the experience almost all of my life of feeling when sitting, standing, or being—as I could be kneeling in my canoe or I could be on the shore it doesn’t matter—I can’t do this deliberately, it’s not something you turn on, you just have to relax and let it happen, but being aware of the life in other creatures…being related to the other beings that are there—human or non-human.
Rachael – The Art Therapist

Rachael is the persona of grace. A trained Occupational Therapist and Art Therapist, she is very active volunteering in her community. Her early rehab work during WWII in a military hospital where she tended to amputees and vets with head injuries, as she said, “was a hugely important time in my life. It’s affected all of my days.” Today Rachael continues her work, volunteering as a therapist to help military personnel and their families deal with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Rachael also assists seniors to locate resources they might need. She says of this volunteer work, “Some people are too numb to do that kind of investigating…they emotionally haven’t got a lovely deep well to dig into and rescue themselves, so they need a little help.”

The arts have played a significant role in Rachael’s life: dance, music, the visual arts, and the written word. Growing up in a home where her father, an editor in one of Canada’s most important book publishers during the twentieth century, habitually entertained writers and artists, Rachael was immersed in the arts and developed a huge appreciation not only for the arts but also for the artists themselves. She chaired the Board of Directors of a professional dance school for five years, taught art and art therapy at several universities, has been responsible for the creation of arts festivals in multiple cities, and speaks of being “particularly interested in cross-pollinating artists.” Rachael continues her long practice with dance and movement by dancing weekly at the age of 93.
“Leave taking” has shaped Rachael’s current life. Many of her family and friends have departed, and she says “we do have to take leave of these people.” In spite of the loss of many beloved people, including her late husband, to whom she was married for 45 years, and an adult son, Rachael’s vocabulary is peppered with positive words that reflect her enthusiasm and passion for life. She frequently speaks of feeling blessed, of being grateful and aware. She feels connected, excited, passionate, creative, and curious. She speaks most frequently of her interest in the art of listening. Rachael’s elegance and grace can best be summed up in her own words when she says “it’s beauty that sustains me and, if we look hard enough, we can find it.”

Stephen – The Trustee

Stephen began teaching at the age of 19 and describes himself as “never not being in school.” He progressed through his professional career first as a teacher, then a Vice-Principal, a Principal, and, since retirement he has sat for two terms as an elected School Board Trustee for the Catholic School system. He holds a Masters in Educational Administration, which he obtained while working through his career.

At 62 years of age, Stephen considers himself first and foremost a family man. He has been married for 40 years and speaks very lovingly of his wife and the mother of his two married children; they have one grandson. Stephen says of his good fortune in marrying his wife, “she just has such great common sense and we have such fun together…it’s worked out wonderfully.” He sums up his philosophy of life as “work hard, play hard, and love your family.” He spends time studying his ancestry.
All through his professional career Stephen coached sports in part so that his students would not see him solely as the administrator or the disciplinarian. When asked what his philosophy of discipline was Stephen replies, “you really do have to separate the doer from the deed and make it impartial in that the individual is reaping the consequences of their own actions.” This philosophy of letting others find their own way was one of the reasons Stephen was nominated for this study. His nominator recognized his ability to sit back upon occasions when dealing with parents in the school setting and let them discuss the relative pros and cons of a decision, learn for themselves, and come to their own decisions rather than using his position of authority.

As with so many of the participants, Stephen has an appreciation for nature. He regularly spends the early part of his mornings outside. He shared that, although others often think because he lives in the country that his property and living is very quiet, he does not agree:

When you’re really just sitting there and watching, it’s not quiet at all. You know, the trees were cracking this morning, and there were birds flying in and there was something happening out on the corner of the marsh, and it’s quiet in comparison I guess to the city, but it’s not really quiet.

**Tessa – The Social Activist**

Born into a fairly large American family, Tessa was one of six siblings. At 71 years of age she has now been married for 50 years to the same man. She has two married children and two grandchildren. Tessa met her husband during her nursing training while he was training to be a doctor and, then, like many young Americans opposed to the Vietnam War, immigrated to Canada in 1970.
Her early nursing days in the USA saw her work as a Psychiatric Nurse and later, here in Canada, she worked as a Pediatric Research Nurse until an early interest of hers in Politics was reignited. She grew up always having some interest in politics and social activism; she got to shake John F. Kennedy’s hand when she served as a young honour guard during her nursing program. She says of her political decision-making that it comes from a place of thinking:

How this will affect people who also don’t have a voice and that probably does affect a lot of my decision-making in a way because I try to think about how other people will be affected by what I decide to do.

Tessa thinks about the bigger picture and environmental issues. She is concerned “when people are not able to access the same things as others, or being treated in as dignified a manner as others, or respected.”

Tessa took her concerns and big picture thinking and has run in both provincial and municipal elections. She served the public as a city councillor for two elected terms, and served as Chair of a municipal Public Health Board for six years. Consistent with Tessa’s values, she is a practicing member of the Unitarian Fellowship, which honours equality as one of its tenets. Tessa’s nomination stemmed in part from recognition of her social activism. Her nominator noted that Tessa has been involved in facilitating a community event on Hiroshima Day for several decades and has worked diligently towards nuclear disarmament.
Vera – The Writer

Vera has written text books, done writing for the Ministry of Education, has edited and contributed articles for a Canadian periodical, and has published a book about one of her ancestors. For a six-year period after her retirement, Vera travelled, spoke, wrote, and informed people about the process and establishment of the United Nations (UN) International Criminal Court. She was a contributor to the writing of the preamble document that set the focus and the values for the workings of the Court. When asked about her involvement with this significant achievement, Vera answered: “I just felt so privileged.” In part, that sense of privilege stemmed from her long-term interest in the UN. She said “I always, all my life, felt very strongly about supporting the UN.” When Vera was 11, the UN was started. At that time, she obtained a copy of the UN Charter that she still has to this day. In later life she got to serve this organization that she thought when established “would answer all of our problems.” She spoke of her service to the UN as a privilege as opposed to an accomplishment. In fact Vera’s nomination was made in part because she was recognized as a person who values the dignity and worth of people and that she cares for those who might be marginalized or not heard.

At 79 years of age, Vera was influenced by the women’s movement and considers herself a feminist. She is divorced, has 3 children, and 2 grandchildren. She had a long teaching career as a Math and English teacher, although she interrupted her career for a nine-year period to stay home and raise her children. Illness on a couple of occasions has
also interrupted Vera’s regular life routines but she hung on through being positive. She spoke of one of those periods of poor health and how she analyzed her predicament:

All this pain is affecting me in this way, what can I do about it, and I spent a lot of time kind of analyzing it—why this pain, why does pain exist and…as soon as I started to be able to do anything, I started writing about it. I thought well this is a real low point health-wise, but it’s going to improve and it has continuously.

**In Their Own Words**

The data analysis segment of this dissertation begins with sharing some of what unfolded during our first group discussion. It was learned, as the eight participants went around the table to introduce themselves, that they all owned self-propelled boats and actively canoed, kayaked, or rowed. What are the odds? It is true that the region in southern Ontario where this research was conducted is ripe with waterways, but I still found it odd that every one of them proclaimed to be an active paddler. On the other hand, as they continued to speak of their connection not only to people but to the land and nature, and of their love of quiet reflective time, it did seem to make sense. Harold summed up the coincidence more practically. “Actually, the chances are higher than you think. I mean, what gets titled as the ultimate of Canadian pursuits is hockey, hockey, hockey, but it isn’t. It’s paddle, paddle, paddle.”

**Life Approach**

You can hear the light heartedness in Harold’s comment. In fact, this light heartedness and positivity was a shared characteristic of this group of individuals in spite of not having escaped life’s hardships: they have suffered and lived through the deaths of loved ones, life-threatening illnesses, and financial hardships. They have had to deal with
a broad range of personal life challenges, yet they seem to share some common ways and demonstrate some common behaviours that keep them buoyant, positive, and grateful.

The participants did project overall positive life attitudes, as indicated by their nominators, or was evident in the language of the collected data. Rachael speaking about her volunteer work with a dance company said, “I’m so exhilarated by what I’m doing that I’m grateful, I’m more than grateful because I feel that I’m being challenged.” The collected data are peppered with words like blessed, fortunate, lucky, privileged, and grateful. Anne reported, “I would always say, I’m just so fortunate. I have a wonderful job and wonderful kids and a wonderful husband; I just feel so lucky.” Clearly these participants maintain an overall positive life attitude in spite of the adversities they encounter. Ardelt (2005a) found the same positive and grateful life approach with the high wisdom scorers in her study: “they did not allow crises and hardships to defeat their spirit and prevent them from enjoying life” (p. 11).

With a sense of humour that was evident at several points during my dealings with the participants of this study, Deborah addressed the concept of positivity: “You might as well be optimistic because the other option doesn’t look very good.” The use of humour seemed to be one of the ways the participants combatted negativity and maintained a positive spirit. One of the reasons Allen was nominated for the study was because his nominator appreciated his positive attitude in spite of his life hardship of having to deal with the loss of two of his adult children. It appears an appreciation of nature helped fuel much of these participants’ positivity.
The study’s wise nominees are all fully engaged in life. They had to juggle their busy schedules to attend the group discussions and make time for the research interviews. Their lives are full of travel, time spent on interests, volunteer work, involvement with family, reflective time, and time spent outdoors communing with nature. They donate a good deal of their time to a variety of community organizations and causes and still find time to do creative work like writing as well as physical activities. These individuals lead relatively disciplined lives yet they also seem to get involved and make time for things they feel warrant their energy. For example, one of the reasons Harold gave for his participation in this study was the following:

I’m participating, more than anything, out of a sense of obligation. I think that if somebody comes and says you’ve been around for quite a while I’d like to pick your brains about X, Y, Z if you’re willing, then I think elders in general have a responsibility to respond positively to this.

**Descriptions of Wisdom**

To continue the sharing and to engage the participants in our first discussion about what wisdom meant to them, I fanned out on a table a large selection of brightly coloured pictures, photos, and painting reprints, about 80 in total. Participants were asked to select one or two prints that spoke to them of wisdom and to share their thinking with the group. The subjects that arose through this sharing exercise addressed wisdom’s link to life’s hardships, listening, inter-generational connections, spirituality, the multidimensional aspect of wisdom, time, and the aesthetics of wisdom. What follows, in their own words, are a few of the descriptions of the selected prints along with the participants’ reasons for why these pictures represented wisdom to them. These
spontaneous descriptions speak clearly about the wise nominees’ understandings of wisdom.

Tessa’s description of wisdom spoke practically about dealing with whatever life brings you.

I picked up this picture of this very intense woman who is steering a boat and she looks so determined and she also looks very courageous I think. She’s obviously in a storm. Life is kind of a storm so you have to sort of grip the wheel and get through it, right?

Of a selected picture of a spiral staircase with a stream of light from a window and the image of a bird soaring upward, Vera said:

Here’s another highly, I think, artistic piece. I just love the idea of the stairway going up and up and the bird—probably a dove—allowing us to fly higher and higher and so I see that as a great incentive for just using our creativity and our wisdom and just reaching for the sky.

A picture chosen by Deborah was of a field of lilac coloured irises whose leaves were dappled with stripes of yellow. She spoke of how time is often required to integrate our component sometimes opposing parts.

There’s a part of us that’s a little contained and the rest of us is just going to be as flamboyant as can be. It takes time to reconcile the different aspects of who we are, so that maybe by the time we come into full flower or past that, we can begin to understand what life is all about.

Stephen and Harold selected quite different pictures. Stephen’s represented wisdom among the many while Harold’s dealt with wisdom’s many dimensions and facets of wisdom.

This is a picture of some hardworking hands [the picture was of a pair of weathered farm hands that contained nuts scooped from a harvested crop] and I think the thing that struck me about it was the idea that there are wise individuals
or that wisdom pervades every walk of life. It is not the sole responsibility or the sole gift of the educated, that there are many wise individuals amongst the general population who are not well educated, but may work with their hands; they may not be able to work at all. (Stephen)

The one I chose was this Picassoesque piece [Picasso’s The Matador] partly because I dabble in art and this kind of thing is always a challenge. This made me realize that if you want to understand Picasso you have to realize that he is portraying a thing from many different directions. It’s not a view from the front or a view from the side or a view from the back. It’s a view from all of those all on the same canvas, so we’ve got a profile here of an eye, but you’ve got the hat as though you’re looking at it from the front. So, we’ve got the two shoulders, but the feet are all cockeyed. That to me illustrates that either in studying wisdom or in exercising it, there’s a multidimensional aspect to it, you can’t deal with just a single dimension of a situation. (Harold)

Vera, Tessa, Deborah, and Anne all chose pictures that portrayed human connections.

I chose this [a picture of an antique tapestry in muted blues and greens] because I think it’s highly creative and beautiful. It has a frame around it and I see this as what we are doing right now, as kind of framing the whole picture of whatever wisdom is or whatever we think it is. Within it we have a tree, which I consider the tree of life, and the roots are kind of symbolized at the bottom here and I feel that that represents our ancestors and this goes up and then represents the children and we are somewhere in the middle. So, we have to be connected with what came before and what is going to follow afterwards. (Vera)

This one [a picture of a beautiful red sky and setting sun with the silhouettes of what appears to be African dancers in the forefront] reminds me of mine which is Grandmothers in Africa and this obviously is someone who has something amazing for these children, very interesting and I’m looking at that and thinking, we do as older people have something to give to children and they have something precious to give to us. They are beautiful pictures. (Tessa)

I was drawn to this one [holding up a picture of four female team members wearing bright yellow matching track suits. They are of different ethnic backgrounds and are wearing medals around their necks]. I think that wisdom comes from a thread of connection between apparent contrasts. From a young age I’ve been fascinated with the apparent contrast in people’s faces, their ethnicity,
their practice in life, their age—everything. It’s finding the common ground in contrast that really fascinates me and that was the same in this. (Deborah)

The one I picked [a picture of a loving grandfather giving his grandchild a hug] because it’s this human connection between generations and I think wisdom grows over years. For the impact of wisdom to be felt, there has to be that human connection to set up that receptivity to it. We learn a lot from children and I think there’s a lot of growth in that interaction between people, and wisdom comes from a lot of interaction with people. (Anne)

**Patterns and Themes Associated with Wisdom**

Our group discussions began gently with introductions and discussions of wisdom in its most general terms. As the group discussions continued and the participants became comfortable with each other, we moved from the broad generalizations of wisdom to more specifics about the participants’ personal practices and wise acts. The themes and patterns presented in these pages emerged from a comprehensive analysis of all of the group discussions and interviews. For this very broad subject of wisdom, where so many elements were discussed by the participants, the patterns of ‘Self’ and ‘Self-in-Relation-to-Other’ clearly emerged (see Table 6). Associated with the ‘Self’ pattern with respect to wisdom are the themes of Authenticity and Wholeness. With the ‘Self-in-Relation-to-Other’ pattern, the themes of Connections, Shared Experiences, and Spirituality emerged.

**Pattern 1: Self**

In alignment with the concepts of wholeness and the integrative component of wisdom that were discussed above, the wise nominees focused on authenticity and living with congruence. The theme of Authenticity emerged from the participant data related to this subject of wisdom under the pattern of ‘Self.’
**Authenticity.** Authors like Cranton (2006), Moore (1992), and Palmer (2004) write about living authentically and living an undivided life. As evidenced in the remarks of these wise nominees, living authentically is a hallmark of how they conduct their lives. Authenticity can be seen as evolving from the process of working to know one’s self. You cannot identify the discord between your actions and your personal values if you do not have a clear understanding of what values you hold dear. Based on the following comments, you can hear how alignment between one’s values and one’s actions is seen as essential for wisdom to be present. Deborah said, “I think wisdom is impossible without seeing that the outside self and inside self are consistent.” Tessa added, “you’re striving to do the right thing, which is what you believe to be good for other people, good for your business or whatever, but you can feel it when you deviate from that I think, or I can.” Anne offered:

> If you do something that doesn’t fit with what you believe is a right act or the correct thing to do, then it creates sort of dissidence, in a way, within you because you see it as not fitting in….what gives me happiness and the feeling of a good life is if I’m following the basic principles that I believe in or following sort of core values that I think are really important.

Rachael’s comments refer to eliciting wisdom from a healthy place of knowing one’s self and being aligned with one’s values before being able to reach out to others:

> Can we have wisdom if the person doesn’t have a comfort in the person we have become….when we’re faced with a certain need and we respond to it, if at that moment there’s a sense of comfort in ourselves then we can react with some wisdom.

**Wholeness.** As academics have struggled over time with the definition of wisdom so too did the study’s participants struggle with their explanations of wisdom. Vera said,
“I never really thought very much about wisdom as such, but it seems like a difficult thing to come to grips with.” In many ways, these participants were drawn to this research more to learn about wisdom rather than to disclose its secrets. What they did discuss, as they struggled to explain wisdom, was that there seemed to be an integrative component, a wholeness to the phenomenon of wisdom and that it was hard to parse apart its component attributes. Harold addressed the concept of integration with the wholeness of wisdom:

Wisdom is akin, in this respect, to beauty in that it comes from some kind of wholeness in the person and can’t be partitioned as belonging to this part of the psyche or that part of the psyche. It seems to me that it comes from the gut or from head and heart combined or whatever metaphor you use for that integration of the person.

Vera too struggled with trying to define wisdom:

I was trying to figure out whether wisdom could be defined by intellect and there’s much more to it than that. So, I thought at least you have to have intellect and intuition—the two of them and that’s where the balance comes between the male and the female. But, you see, I think there’s a lot more than that...Well, just this whole holistic approach is what I’d like to think about ….it brings the arts into it, but it also comes into all these other things that I guess make people whole—intellect, intuition, and everything in between—spirituality and—I wrote down that the only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing, which was credited to Socrates.

Deborah used an analogy to describe the integrative aspect of wisdom. She compared wisdom to our Canadian Toonie:

Okay, take a toonie. On the one side you have conscious, the other side you have unconscious. So what unites them? You know a toonie has gold in the middle—that’s a core of experience. That’s how I would see it. And what’s really interesting, if you looked at the little rim on the outside, nobody ever looks at that, do they? They see the one side, or they see the other side. They might see the gold piece in the middle that connects them, but what we need to be doing is
looking at where conscious and unconscious meet together. And maybe the total of wisdom is that little band that’s so invisible.

**Pattern 2: Self-in-Relation-to-Other**

Connections, Shared Experiences, and Spirituality are the themes that emerged from the data on wisdom under the pattern of ‘Self-in-Relation-to-Other.’

**Connections.** Tessa, during our final interview, discussed how she believes that wisdom results and develops from our interactions with others: “Wisdom does arrive from community and in community. It really doesn’t happen on its own.” She advised that, to enhance the ability to be wise, one must “be aware of what is happening in the community.” Tessa also spoke of how wisdom is dependent on considering community and one’s effect on others:

You can’t be wise if you don’t take other people into consideration, when you’re not involved in your community, when you don’t know how other people feel and think. I think that just has to be there for wisdom, and whether it’s a big family or a community, that interaction and not always thinking of one’s self but how this will affect others, is probably something that is good.

The importance of connection was prevalent throughout many of our group discussions; connections not only with family and generations of family but with people in general, connections with the land, spiritual connections, and connections with ideas.

Harold expressed that he believes that “wisdom is exercised inter-generationally.” Tessa similarly said that her parents served as role models for her and offered that “I think I kind of absorbed that.” Anne too spoke of the influence and advantages offered to her by her family. “I think the greatest gift I had in life was my parents; just great parents
and family.” Rachael also credited her family as well as her friends for giving her so much and for their influences contributing to how she deals with others:

It seems to be that most of us have had examples in our lives where maybe friends or maybe parents or maybe colleagues, but I’d certainly come down heavily on the family background where in the family background there were imprints left that would encourage us to think creatively when we’re dealing with situations or with people….if you have an environment that is constantly reinforcing a kind of generosity of spirit, then surely that has had an influence on how I might react with other people.

Besides alluding to valuable connections with family, Rachael spoke of her understanding of spiritual connections when she talked of her habit of “keeping time.” She reported that the individuals who become the focus of her meditation “seem to feel connected to some kind of spirit that is healing in surgery, healing in mourning.” She reported that through this process “I feel as if I belong to some great circle of connectedness.” She also offered that not only is she comforting them but “a by-product of all this in this quiet, absorbing moment, I’m comforting myself.” During her annual retreat and walks in Ireland, Rachael continues to feel connected. She feels the presence of ancestry and the past spirits of those who inhabited the land. She feels that connection through the limestone rock: “I have deep connections with millions of people it seems. Surely, I’m learning from that connectedness new skills.” Rachael not only described her deep connections to spirit, but she also spoke of her deep connection to the land that she treads annually in Ireland. She “sinks into nature,” and it rejuvenates her. We have seen other examples of our wise nominees’ connections to the land and nature. For example,
Allen spoke almost spiritually of his awe and connection with nature as he described the following scene:

When I was canoeing, for a long time—the mornings were magnificent actually. I’d come out and the sun coming out … it was great just to sit there and look around and it was absolutely beyond belief that we live in such a magnificent country and I saw places that most people have never seen or would see actually. So, I’m always very grateful for that.

According to these wise nominees, people, spirit, and nature are all ways we connect.

Connecting through ideas was another subject discussed. Rachael said:

I think for me the possibilities in connecting with ideas are immense and that’s such a creative moment when people connect with an idea that excites them and also they can see it as possibilities. For me, that is a wonderful place to be in when you’re connecting ideas and I would like to think that when we all leave this circle here, that we’ve connected on so many ideas, that we’ll take and create new possibilities within.

Tessa suggested that it is always “important to check around, it’s important to reach out to other people because you may not be the only one having an idea and then working with other people always adds strength.” Tessa summed up the value of connecting:

“there is a really profound need for people to connect.” Deborah offered, “I get energized and keep my perspective by connecting with others.” Deborah explained her perspective on our connections with others and wisdom. She saw the possibility of influence even when ‘the other’ might not be physically present.

You may even have in your mind how someone else that you know, that you regard as wise, would do something. So even though you appear to be operating without people visibly around you, you’re using the example of others, how they might influence you. So, in that sense, it is still a social construct.
**Shared experiences.** We share experiences in so many ways. As pointed out by Deborah above, even when someone is not physically present, we may be sharing an experience through previous learning or role modelling. She said “the opportunity for one person to exercise wisdom is probably a reflection of what they’ve observed or learned from someone else.” Even though our group discussion at times focused on the individual, Deborah said, “we’ve talked about wisdom being something that evolves from maybe personal experience, but more likely shared experience…. wisdom evolves from shared experience.” Deborah’s understanding of sharing and wisdom is a gentle reminder of the importance of being present and available for others:

It’s okay to prompt other people to think for themselves. So, rather than giving advice, it’s okay not to be the person who might know, but to just walk side by side with someone as they figure out what is appropriate for them.

When we interact and share an experience, the parties involved inevitably are changed. It is very likely that significant experiences induce a more significant change within the involved parties, which resonates with Harold’s comment: “I think that wisdom or wise acts maybe almost always change the quality of connections that are involved in the act.” Through this thesis, I have pointed out that there is impact associated with wise action. This notion of Harold’s takes the concept of change amongst the parties to another level that recognizes not only personal change of the individuals, but a change to the dynamic or impact on the relationship of the players.

**Spirituality.** Discussions by this group of wise nominees that touched on spirituality exposed their very personal experiences with and beliefs on the subject. For
example, Deborah described spirituality as the “art of seeing who they [others] are, who you are, and then somehow coming together . . . to me, that’s where I find profound meaning in life, is that communion with another soul. And that’s my spirituality.” She further explained that, “spirituality is acknowledging the spirit of who you are and then the artistry of life is living that out.” Stephen, a practicing Catholic, shared a personal experience that he related as spiritual. He told us about his encounter with Judge Matheson who wrote a book about the creation of Canada’s maple leaf flag. Matheson in his late 80s had been invited to speak about the history of the flag at Stephen’s school. He sat in the middle of the school’s gymnasium with 480 Junior Kindergarten through to Grade 8 students gathered around listening to his stories in complete silence. When the lunch bell rang, Stephen reported the students wouldn’t leave until Judge Matheson told them it was OK to leave. Stephen said of that experience:

I was standing there and I was thinking, this is such an inspirational and spiritual moment. And one of the little kids, he was a real character, and we were going out of the gym and I was kind of holding the door and ushering the kids out, he looked up at me and he said, “I’ll never think of our flag the same way again.” I thought, “Yes! Right on the nail!” I felt privileged to have been in the same room with this man, but also to see his effect on people and so that’s my spirituality story.

His spirituality story was a story of connection, awe, and impact.

During our last interview, I asked Harold how closely related or how intertwined his concept of spirituality was with wise action or wisdom. He answered:

I don’t know. The reason is that I see them as all part of who I am and what I do and I’m not able to dissect the anatomy of a wise act from the anatomy of spiritual practice. They are just sort of part and parcel of the same thing. It’s not like being able to skin an orange.
What Harold could offer was that his spiritual practice “connects me with the unseen and indescribable part of the universe.”

In Hall’s (2010) book on wisdom, he devotes the last words of the book to Vivian Clayton who in 1976 produced one of the first original research documents on wisdom. Hall had travelled to meet and interview Clayton in 2007. At that time, Clayton was a bee keeper. She had left her academic studies and years of clinical practice behind. Her final words of advice about wisdom were, “leave some mystery there” (p. 272). According to the words of this group of wise nominees, there definitely was an element of mystery, wonderment, and the unknown that they associated with wisdom and linked to spirituality. Harold said:

I think wisdom has mystical dimensions and this seems almost entirely contrary to the neurochemical picture that Allen gives us. Yet, I don’t believe that these are inconsistent. I think that there are things that are well-explained and can be well-understood using the tools of physics and chemistry and so on, but there is another dimension, the spiritual one. . . an aspect that I can only say or use the word mystical to describe it.

Deborah spoke of the unexplained, often everyday occurrences that just seem to mystically and conveniently happen that provide her with a sense of comfort and wonderment; that seem spiritual in nature.

The interesting thing that has happened over many years, there will be little signs. When you said ‘mystical’, something will happen. Someone will mention something on the radio and it’s exactly the piece of information that I’ve been listening for or looking for and I think, oh that’s handy. Then I’ll be going on and someone else will make me a phone call and invite me to come for a quick coffee and I think, oh! When I join together those little pieces of information or those little bits of experience I kind of get a feeling like life is working out okay. It’s a reminder that I might be on the right path.
Deborah added that, “spirituality, for me, is living out who I am in concert with whatever force helps me do it.”

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I introduced the study’s participants through brief profiles and quotes about their understandings of wisdom. Through the participants’ own words, the reader is provided with a glimpse of some of their common approaches to life such as their positive and grateful attitudes, and their habits of living authentically. These participants have a deep respect for their lived connections with others and nature. The reverence with which they speak of their spirituality and connections provides a sense of how important they view the social aspects of wisdom.

The next chapter speaks to some of the common shared rituals and practices of this group of participants: practices that pave the way for their capacity for wise action.
Chapter 5

Findings: First Comes The Practicing

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit.

Aristotle

The word practice is ambiguous and so this chapter begins by examining the word’s multiple meanings. The bulk of the chapter deals with the general life practices or habits of the study’s wise nominees and concludes by introducing the concept of a body of wise practice.

Practice Defined

Schön (1983) found it necessary, for his work on how professionals think in action, to define practice in the two following ways:

When we speak of a lawyer’s practice, we mean the kinds of things he does, the kinds of clients he has, the range of cases he is called upon to handle. When we speak of someone practicing the piano, however, we mean the repetitive or experimental activity by which he tries to increase his proficiency on the instrument. In the first sense, ‘practice’ refers to performance in a range of professional situations. In the second, it refers to preparation for performance. (p. 60)

For this study, I draw on Schön’s two definitions of practice as we can consider our wise nominees’ habitual practices as preparing them for performance and their wise acts as performance in life. Wisdom over the years has been considered a form of human strength or excellence, the ideal endpoint or pinnacle of successful human development (Ardelt, 2005b; Kuntzmann & Stange, 2007; Staudinger, 2008). As this group of individuals has been nominated for their wise acts we can consider these individuals as
exhibiting excellent behaviour and excelling in some life domains. Their body of wise practice, which is addressed at the end of this chapter, can be considered their professional life practice. In the previous chapter I noted how these individuals treat their life reverently. This chapter demonstrates how diligently these wise nominees work at life in general. Their general life practices prepare these individuals for wise act performance.

The Participants’ Life Practices: Preparation for Performance

I begin this section not with a success story of practice but with an example of how imposed practice can negatively impact one’s life. As I asked the group of wise nominee participants during our second group discussion what they regularly spend time doing, they began to share, as expected, some stories of their typical day and the kinds of general practices in which they have engaged over their lives. However, Vera had a completely different take on this subject of practice. She came prepared to our meeting with her thoughts organized on paper. Vera chose to read this narrative to the group:

I struggled and struggled with the topic, my general life practices; first assignment in the wisdom group. I like and respect both the researcher and my nominator and I was curious to understand and learn about the research in which would be the subject, but this first task I wanted to avoid. Why? After trying to dismiss it I realized I couldn’t get rid of it. It was always there at the back of my mind, perhaps, finally succumbing to writing about it will allow it to release me.

As a child, I was brought up with a whole series of good practices that regulated my life to the extent that there were no surprises. The routine never changed. All of my physical needs were satisfied, almost all decisions were made for me, my clothes were laid out the night before having been selected by my mother. I hated shopping because I never had a choice of my own. I got up in the morning, dressed and practiced the piano for three-quarters of an hour. By that time breakfast had been prepared and I sat down with the family to eat it. The whole
day was mapped out for me. Lunch was prepared and always at twelve noon, dinner at six sharp. Bedtime progressed but was always earlier than that of my friends and so my life went. I might as well have been in the army. As an adult, I decided that I would not have such a regimented life. I would not always have three meals a day and certainly not at seven, twelve and six. I would go with whims at a moment’s notice, but I did have some priorities; family was first. If any of the family asked favours or wanted to spend time with me I would drop everything to satisfy that request.

What Vera had negatively experienced in her childhood was routine, regimentation, and structure that felt constricting and obviously negative to her. In her adult life, she has tried to avoid routine and regular practices but still she shared with us that each morning after her dog nudges her awake and before getting out of bed she spends about a half hour of reflective time that she described as follows: “I don’t know if you’d call it meditation or what you would call it, but it’s my time when my thoughts just kind of wander and I kind of collect myself and that’s the way I start my day” (Vera). So even Vera, with her conscious efforts not to lead a regimented life, has at least one daily meditation practice. She also attends service with her Unitarian congregation on Sundays and spends time each day writing. Regular practices, but practices of choice, have crept back into Vera’s spontaneous life.

The rest of the group shared stories of daily and regular ongoing practices that they had chosen to engage in over their life spans. Their practices demonstrate a strong level of commitment and adherence to a disciplined life style. Their motivation, as it was for so many of the stories they shared, came down to their sense of ‘it’s the right thing to do.’ Harold speaking about meditation said:
You don’t do this to get the feel good, you do this because it’s the right thing to do and whether it makes you feel good at the time or whether it makes you feel depressed at the time is irrelevant to the practice. The discipline is to perform the practice.

In other words, Harold focuses on the long-term gains of his meditation practice and minimizes or even ignores the short-term or immediate feelings and results of his practice. In general, the participants exert conscious disciplined efforts on their personal practices as they are convinced of their long-term benefits. They believe their practices are good for their well-being. Big picture thinking—thinking beyond the immediate situation—seems to motivate many of the actions of this group of individuals.

Table 7 summarizes some of the personal practices the study’s wise nominees spend conscious effort performing on an ongoing basis. Stephen echoed Aristotle’s quote that opened this chapter when he said “I think wise practice might be considered a habit.”

Table 7: Participants' Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Allen</strong></td>
<td>Meditation; daily attends evening mass</td>
<td>Morning walks with dog; daily bike riding; canoeing; cross-country skiing</td>
<td>Morning prayers for extended family; canoeing &amp; communing with nature; member of community organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anne</strong></td>
<td>Daily quiet time to plan out day</td>
<td>Aqua-fit; walk</td>
<td>Family time - 3 times per week with grandchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deborah</strong></td>
<td>Pays attention to what she pays attention to—regular</td>
<td>Yoga</td>
<td>Volunteering; daily calls to family and friends; daily time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mindfulness; plans at beginning of day what the end of day will look like outdoors

**Harold**
- 3 daily contemplative periods (centering prayers); making music
- Walks; stretches; Tai-Chi; differing daily exercises (depends on weather, the hour, and his body); canoeing; skating
- Volunteering; regularly outdoors in nature

**Rachael**
- Personal meditations; annual walking retreat in Ireland
- Daily stretches; walks; weekly dance classes
- Volunteers with dance company; volunteers with veterans with PTSD; “Keeps Time” scheduled meditations for others undergoing hardships; regular tea discussion gatherings; writing

**Stephen**
- Early morning quiet time
- Walks; coaches sports; curls in winter; goes bass fishing
- Volunteering; community service; studying ancestry

**Tessa**
- Daily exercise becomes meditative
- Daily stretches
- Volunteering; political & community service

**Vera**
- Morning reflections
- Daily stretches
- Volunteering; writing

**Patterns and Themes Associated with Wise Practices**

Two over-arching patterns emerged from the complete data set that I have titled ‘Self’ and ‘Self-in-Relation-to-Other’ (see Table 6). With respect to wise practice, two themes or groupings of practices surfaced under the first pattern titled ‘Self.’ These were the ‘Quiet Reflective Practices: Minding the Mind,’ and the ‘Physical Practices: Minding
the Body.’ Under the second pattern, ‘Self-in-Relation-to-Other,’ the group of practices that emerged as a theme has been titled ‘Connecting-with-Other Practices: Feeding the Soul.’

**Pattern 1: Self**

When you look at Table 7, both the Quiet Reflective and Physical practices relate to the participants’ personal well-being and development of self. The participants made it clear they make disciplined efforts to tend to self and only then, from a position of well-being, are they in a position to tend to others. Anne said, as she addressed the subject of what efforts were made by the group to enable wise act performance:

> I think keeping yourself in a good mental and alert, less stressed out state. I think we all know what we need to do for ourselves to keep ourselves centered and balanced and that helps to perform better in any situation.

Harold echoed those thoughts when he said:

> I do my best to do whatever it takes to fuel that and then everything good, bad, or indifferent flows out of that. That may be selfish; the original impulse sounds selfish. I really don’t want to feel miserable, I want to feel well and then if you feel well then it’s possible to be generous. I really like the idea of generosity of spirit. That’s a wonderful set of words, but you can’t do that if you’re sore, aching, tired, sick, or down in the dumps. It’s really hard, so whatever it takes to feel well.

**Quiet reflective practices: Minding the mind.** Some examples of the type of Quiet Reflective Practices the participants engage in include meditation, centering prayers, and communing alone in nature. Anne related a story of how she and her husband had helped out one of their married children’s families by sharing their home with them and their grandchildren for many months while they were in the process of
moving. She realized she had been missing her quiet time: “What I appreciate now is just that quiet time to reflect uninterrupted . . . how important that is just for your well-being and feeling productive.” Rachael goes on an annual retreat to Ireland to be alone and rejuvenate herself. At 93 years of age, this is a practice she has been religiously following for the past 16 years. “I go once a year to walk by myself silently for anything up to five hours a day. There is something about the quiet landscape that is transforming.” Harold offered that “95 percent of my spiritual practice, both daily and weekly, is in silence.”

Quieting the mind and spending time reflecting are important to all of the participants in one way or another. Vera said, “I think wisdom sometimes comes from quietness.” Her appreciation for spending quiet time stemmed from her early childhood memories of spending quiet time with her grandfather.

I can remember going on walks with him and he walked very slowly. I think he probably wasn’t very well, but we didn’t talk and I just thought that was so special that we would be together for, you know, a half of an hour or so and we wouldn’t talk. We’d just be there together and I’ve always valued quietness.

Vera’s appreciation for quiet reflective time was carried through in the way she brought up her children. She said:

We don’t allow children to have that reflective time. We often keep them busy. It’s something I didn’t do with my children. I would say, well can’t you find something for yourself to do and I wanted them to have free time when they could think or whatever they wanted to do.

Deborah’s form of quietening herself happens regularly and frequently but not as a time set aside each day for meditation. Rather, Deborah practices mindfulness. She centers herself, quietens down, and pays attention. She spoke of this practice, “in the
course of every day I feel the jumble and then I wonder what is happening. So, then, I just quiet down and pay attention.”

**Physical practices: Minding the body.** Physical activities and exercises, the minding the body activities, that this group of wise nominees engaged in on a regular basis included among others—daily stretches, yoga, Tai Chi, dancing, regular walking, canoeing, swimming, biking, curling, and skating. These individuals had adjusted their commitment to physical exercise based on their age and abilities but Tessa’s comment “I’ve always been a very active person” was representative of the group. Allen and Harold, both avid canoeists, are exceptional in their love of the outdoors and spend a good deal of time being physically active outdoors. Besides cycling over the Pyrenees after retirement, Allen said he rides his bike daily. “After breakfast I ride my bike down to the lake continuing along the waterfront into the city and then head back home. I love the bike and I’ve been riding a long time.” Deborah started her career as a Physical Education and Wellness teacher who brought dance into her programs. She said of her own learning and love of dance: “in university, I had the privilege of being taught by one of the best modern dancers in Canada at the time and she nurtured in me some little bud of this flame of dance.” Stephen through his whole teaching career and beyond has coached sports. He said “I’ve always coached . . . whether it was girl’s hockey or rugby or football—anyway, I ended up staying with the football program and I’ve enjoyed every minute of it.” He still coaches football today. These participants have been and still are interested in moving and exercising their bodies. They care for and mind their bodies.
Pattern 2: Self-in-Relation-to-Other

As I found in my previous research on wisdom (Taylor, 2010), this group of participants feel enormous connections with their world. They feel connected with people, connected with the natural world, and connected spiritually where spirituality has a different meaning for each of them. Their spiritual thinking is extremely broad and varied.

The participants’ big picture thinking has them expand their horizons and connect beyond the immediate. When they refer to their connections to people, they think inter-generationally about ancestors and future generations. Anne chose a couple of pictures that spoke to her about wisdom in one of the activities conducted during the group sessions. Of these she said, “the first one I picked because it’s this human connection between generations. . . . We learn a lot from children and I think there’s a lot of growth in that interaction between people and wisdom.” When this group of wise nominees thinks about the natural world, they think not only about today’s natural environment but they think about sustainability. Tessa said, “It’s the state of the world that I do worry about and I always have.” She spoke of being conscious of her consumer purchases. She buys locally, and she doesn’t make purchases from countries that treat their workers unfairly. She said of her decisions, “I do think about how this affects the bigger picture.”

Connecting-with-other practices: Feeding the soul. This theme, the third group of practices, encompasses activities such as volunteering, writing, ‘keeping time,’ prayers for others, time with family and friends, and communing with nature. As we are social
creatures and thrive connecting with others, I see this group of practices as feeding our soul, enriching our individuality, and connecting us to all of humanity and the planet.

Rachael’s practice of ‘keeping time’ was absolutely lovely. She connects with others from a distance and feels her energy works in service for them. In her own words, her “keeping time” means the following:

Many decades ago I began to say to people anxious about their upcoming surgery or friends mourning a loss, I will keep the time with you. At the designated hour I would find a quiet place to sit and send thoughts that I hoped would give them strength and comfort during and after their surgery or service of remembering. Those times became meditations where I was so focused that the experience became a transforming one for me. This is a practice I continue today, while at the same time I make time for my own personal meditation.

Allen uses prayer to connect with others. “My day begins with morning prayers for my extended family.” Harold, who during his career was instrumental in designing and structuring a university outdoor educational program and who feels very connected to nature, said:

Many of us have shared some kind of feeling of belonging in that place and being related to the other beings that are there – human or non-human… it’s something that lies at the heart of the way we feel at home in natural surroundings.

Rachael again offered:

I still have a little bit of the Irish pagan in me. I have a little bit of the First Nation in me and I need that proximity to nature, but I need that proximity to silence and I need to hear the voices in the stones. I speak to the stones because the stones have history in them in that part of the world [Ireland]. They all contain fossils and fossils have stories. I’m in an area where there are small villages where the little tiny stone houses are roofless and people have been swept away by ocean currents. So, I have a sense that those people, you know, their lives are still in those stones.
Just as we are instructed by a flight attendant during plane takeoff to first put on our own oxygen mask before tending to the aid of our children, the wise participants in this study live their lives in this manner. First they tend to self so they are better prepared to perform optimally in life enabling them to tend to others. I relate a wise individual’s Quiet Reflective, Physical, and Connecting-with-Other practices to Schön’s (1983) definition of preparing for performance. Their practices are how these wise nominees attend to the health of their Mind, Body, and Soul to prepare them to function optimally in life. Their life practices contribute to their ability to perform wise acts; they prepare for performance.

**Body of Wise Practice**

A Body of Wise Practice can be thought of as the sum total of individuals’ ongoing life practices or habits, as described above, as well as their successes and failures at wise action. This body of wise practice could be compared to a pianist’s body of professional practice, which might include some successful performances and some not-so-successful performances along with all their ongoing rituals and practices.

As a group we wrestled with the definitions of practice. Harold articulated his understandings of the multiple definitions of practice and the concept of a body (or lifetime) of wise practice as follows. In fact, Harold’s definitions are very close to Schön’s (1983) definitions:

My practice as a concert pianist is different from my practicing scales and arpeggios and the technique of my instrument. So, it’s that first kind of practice that I think we’re talking about. It consists of a series of acts that may be related in some kind of way by their process and by the spirit behind them, but may be
totally unrelated with respect to content, like one [wise act] might be financial and another might be educational and the third one might be familial about a relationship within family. But, so I see wise acts as being the individual components that go into making a lifetime of wise practice just like a single concert is an event in a professional musician’s practice or one court case is one component in a lawyer’s practice in the practice of law. (Harold)

Anne addressed the concept of a body of wise practice similarly: “Well a wise act is a one time; I mean it is defined by time. Wise practice I see as having several wise acts within it that shows that it’s really not just an accident.” The group concurred and saw a body of wise practice being comprised of multiple wise acts. We can see that a body of wise practice would contain successful wise acts but it also contains acts that weren’t so successful. Anne discussed the indirect impact of unsuccessful acts: “they would impact wise practice . . . because you will say I will never do that again.” Allen discussed how we can learn from failures in life. He used Churchill as an example. “Wise decisions are related to prior blunders . . . [Churchill] made some enormous blunders, enormous blunders. He admitted these, actually, in his books later on, but blunders nonetheless.

We’re not perfect, so it can happen to any wise man.” These participants saw a body of wise practice as consisting of wise acts as well as unsuccessful acts that contribute to their learning. I would add, based on the evidence of this group of wise nominees, that individuals’ bodies of wise practice would also include their habitual practices of tending to mind, body, and soul. This group of individuals maintains their ongoing life practices regardless of the ups and downs or successes and failures in their lives.
Chapter Summary

The dual meanings of practice were discussed in this chapter. The care of self was shown to be extremely important to these wise nominee participants. They described their ongoing habits of tending to the health of their minds, bodies, and souls, which strengthens them physically and emotionally so they are able to perform optimally in life; to act wisely upon occasion.

The next chapter presents the personal wise act experiences of the study’s participants, and some acclaimed wise acts performed by renowned wise individuals that were drawn from the literature and discussed by the participants.
Chapter 6

Findings: Wise Acts

I let Harold’s voice open this chapter as he addressed the segregation of an individual’s wise action from the individual him or herself: “I don’t think you can label a person as a wise person. They are just a person who frequently does wise acts amongst the other ordinary or foolish acts.” Not only do these words link to the concept of a body of wise practice as presented in the previous chapter, but they speak to the discussion our group had concerning their personal wise acts and those of renowned wise exemplars acknowledged in the literature. Those wise act descriptions are shared in this chapter along with the associated patterns and themes that emerged from the data on this subject.

Wise Exemplars

Nelson Mandela passed away at the age of 95 on December 5, 2013, only days after the group had met on November 29, 2013 and shared some of their stories, interactions, and opinions of noted wise exemplars. We discussed many of Mandela’s accomplishments and his shift in policy from a revolutionary activist at one point in his life to a supporter of non-violent protest in his later life. Deborah expressed her admiration for Mandela and said of his policy shift and changes throughout his life, “I was struck by the fact that someone could go through a metamorphosis to be a catalyst for positive change rather than getting stuck with a label ‘revolutionist’ and cause change in a completely different direction.” At the group’s next meeting on December 13th, the participants felt compelled to continue their discussion of wise exemplars. A common
observation made about Mandela as well as the many other exemplars discussed such as Mother Theresa, Mahatma Ghandi, Albert Schweitzer, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jane Addams, Eli Wiesel, Ovide Mercredi, David Suzuki, and Jean Vanier was that, in spite of their many accomplishments and fame, these individuals had their share of human flaws. These flaws demonstrate how wonderfully human these exemplars are and in so many ways their human flaws endeared them to the group. Vera said, “I think with all the exemplars it is very interesting that there’s usually something that you don’t admire about them, which makes them human.” Allen too remarked on human failings and referred to Winston Churchill’s blunders. Anne spoke specifically of Mandela and noted that in his youth he was considered a womanizer, arrogant, and displayed a hot temper, but that his prison term had changed him. Upon leaving prison, Mandela met with his former prosecutors in an act of forgiveness and reconciliation. Of this act, Tessa said, “[Mandela] just realized that that was the right thing to do. Maybe that’s what wisdom is about in some ways.” Wise action, as expressed by this group at several junctures throughout our discussion of history, kept coming back to the idea of doing the right thing.

Early on we learned from Stephen that, in his role as Vice Principal and disciplinarian, he made a point of separating a student’s actions from the student. This separation of the deed from the doer is not a new philosophy, but it does go a long way in explaining how individuals grow and learn from their experiences and how expertise in one life domain does not necessarily translate to expertise in another domain. Harold
addressed the specificity and situational aspects of wise acts when he said, “recognizing that the exemplary nature is probably situational and particular to a particular event or decision or something like that rather than being an unmitigated and unrelenting lifetime of non-stop wisdom.” The literature on wisdom supports this idea of wisdom being contextual. Brown (2005) suggests, “that wisdom is contextually defined – what is wise in one context may not be wise in another” (p. 355). We can see that some actions undertaken by an individual can seem wise in a particular situation yet other actions taken by the same individual in another circumstance or situation may not seem as wise.

As the group continued to share stories of wise exemplars and their wise acts, a discussion concerning the sphere of influence and quantification of the benefits of a wise act arose amongst the group. Harold argued that “quantifying the duration of the benefit and quantifying the number of people who benefit does not seem to me to be relevant to the degree of wisdom contained in the act.” A robust conversation around this topic did not result in a consensus on this subject concerning the magnitude of the impact required to define a wise act. However, Stephen commented that, “I think that wise acts can stand on their own and not be second-guessed for lack of a better term with hindsight. I think something that’s wise can stand on its own for however long it’s relevant.”

**Participants’ Wise Acts**

The everyday, very personal, and very ordinary wise acts as reported in Table 8 are considered wise by the study’s participants because of the feedback they received from others, the learned lessons, and the perceived impact of their actions. What inspired
these actions in the first place, mainly was a sense of doing what in the nominees’ personal opinions seemed to be the right thing in spite of public opinion or possible negative consequences. These actions can be seen to be domain specific given how they related to the individuals’ lives, experience, and in some cases their career paths.

Table 8: Nominees’ Wise Act Experiences and Lessons Learned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wise Nominee</th>
<th>Wise Act Experience</th>
<th>Reported Lessons Learned</th>
<th>Timing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allen The Voyageur</td>
<td>1. Allen felt compelled, because of the sensitivity of the work being done at his blood bank, to report on the drunken misbehaviour of one of his superiors in spite of his loyalty and liking for the individual. He felt he “had to do the right thing.” 2. Allen decided because of poor treatment and strappings by his teacher, to quit high school at age 13. Later in life, Allen returned to school part-time while he worked and earned a PhD in Experimental Medicine.</td>
<td>1. Early Career 2. Youth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne The Community Developer</td>
<td>By enlisting the cooperation of staff in her not-for-profit organization, Anne found a way to provide ongoing support and regular pay for an employee whose family was going through hard times and could not work full-time.</td>
<td>- Late Career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah The Gardener</td>
<td>Instead of offering advice to a student during a struggling time for that student, Deborah supported the student by posing questions for consideration as opposed to direct advice that resulted in the student’s recognition of her ability to cope. The student many years later thanked Deborah and told her how important her support and direction had been.</td>
<td>- Questioning is often more important than answering - It is OK to prompt others to think for themselves - It’s OK not to know</td>
<td>- Mid-Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold The Naturalist Professor</td>
<td>As a new teacher to a school and against the tutelage of a more senior teacher, Harold decided not to strap a student for a particular bad action as directed. After the fact, Harold received acknowledgment and support from the school’s Vice-Principal as they no longer wanted to continue a culture of strapping students.</td>
<td>- His resistance to conform was affirmed</td>
<td>- Early Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachael The Art Therapist</td>
<td>Rachael was instrumental in the start-up of an arts festival. In her first year, she encouraged a young photographer, facing many hardships, to</td>
<td>- Late Career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
keep up her photography work but also to concentrate on her poetry work. The artist became successful in both realms and today manages that arts festival.

| Stephen  | In his first year as high school Vice-Principal, Stephen was faced with the difficult decision of how to manage graduation for the double-cohorte of 800 students and their families. He found an unprecedented solution and held the successful event outdoors in spite of negative feedback from those advising against this strategy. |
| The Trustee | - Late Career |

| Tessa  | Working as a City Councillor, Tessa realized a large entertainment complex was going to be built in the town core no matter what. So she decided to focus her energy not to fight the inevitable but to work cooperatively with other Councillors to find the most appropriate location for the facility. |
| The Social Activist | - It’s important to reach out to other people - Late Career |

| Vera  | Vera wrote an unsolicited paper informing UN delegates of what she understood of the Americans’ underlying motive for their position regarding the UN Criminal Court. |
| The Writer | - One positive wise act experience gives you the courage to risk take and leads to another wise act. - Late Career |

Aside from the wise acts tabled above, various other wise incidents came up during our discussions. As well, the study’s nominators gave numerous accounts of their nominees’ demonstrated wise behaviours and reported specific incidents of their wise actions. Coincidentally, during one of our group discussion sessions, we had the privilege of witnessing a wise act in progress. The description of that wise act is detailed in this chapter in the section titled ‘Intuition.’

What follows immediately is a description of the patterns and themes that emerged from the discussions this group of nominated wise individuals participated in concerning wise acts.
Patterns and Themes Associated with Wise Acts

Analyzing data on the subject of wise acts resulted in the emergence once again of the two patterns of ‘Self’ and ‘Self-in-Relation-to-Other.’

The themes that emerged from the wise act data associated with the pattern of ‘Self’ were Confidence, Learning, Intention, and Intuition. The last two, Intention and Intuition, almost seem diametrically opposed to each other, but it is the integration and fine balance between these two that has the potential to elevate an ordinary everyday act to be viewed and experienced as wise action. Liking/loving others, Listening to others, and the Impact of ones’ actions on others, were all themes that emerged from these data that are linked to the pattern of ‘Self-in-Relation-to-Other.’

Pattern 1: Self

Confidence. Rachael told us that “wisdom comes with confidence in one’s self” and even questions, “Can we have wisdom if the person doesn’t have a comfort in the person we have become?” Vera advised to “believe in yourself – have faith in your own ability to perform wise acts.”

Speaking specifically to the group’s wise acts (see Table 8), Anne made an observation, “I saw one commonality between Tessa’s and Stephen’s and my sort of acts that happened later in careers, basically a lot of experience led up to them resulting in a building of confidence and the ability to take risks.” Tessa also spoke of a gradual building of confidence where her confidence resulted from learning to cope with life situations. “I gained a lot of self-confidence in that way in all the sort of things I did as
my life has progressed because most things can be dealt with.” The consensus of the group was that we are all born with the capability to act wisely but developments in life enable wise action. The development of confidence in oneself, in part gathered from experience and the survival of life’s hardships, is an important enabler, especially when confidence becomes paired with a willingness to take risks. Vera said you have to develop “a sense of self-worth because I think you’d have to have some of that before you do some of these courageous, outlandish things that maybe some of us have done later.”

Having confidence in one’s self in part stems from the work associated with clearly knowing yourself. You have to know your personal capabilities and values before you can take a position in any situation. Anne told us, “you have to know yourself” and Deborah spoke to the work required to know yourself when she said, “I have to know who I am and that’s more an art than a science.”

Deborah raised the point of our original capacity for wise action. “I’m assuming people are born with the capacity to be wise.” Harold concurred, “the ability to be wise is innate; every human being has it.” But even if we were to assume, like these participants, that nature provides every human being with the capacity to act wisely, it was clear from the participants’ comments that nurture plays a huge role in the process. Vera expressed the importance that overcoming early-life situations plays in later-life wise actions: “I think people that do have difficulties to deal with in their childhood often come out stronger in the end and are able to do some of these wise acts.” Allen too voiced his
opinion that experience and trauma either take a toll on an individual or set the stage for better things to come: “Your wise acts are also going to be dependent on your life experiences and what you’ve been through, especially when it comes to trauma.” Harold voiced his opinion on how, at times, courage is called for when he said, “I think the willingness to be bold enables wise acts.” As evidenced by the participants’ comments, learning from, coping with, and surviving difficulties can lead to the building of confidence in one’s ability to deal with life.

Most of the participants discussed having a fair bit of liberty in their youth. Some of that liberty was attributed to the times in which they lived. We discussed how having been trusted with liberty in their youth may have led to their later life confidences. Deborah, for example, shared her early freedom experiences of learning on her own from her actions: “My parents trusted me to fail, to succeed, and to see how the two were related.” Vera, the exception to the rule with regards to freedom, said she always felt restricted and controlled so she enjoyed any minimal opportunity for freedom. She described a day at camp when she could do what she wanted.

You got a bagged lunch in the morning and you could go anywhere you wanted on the property, and there was about 600 acres, as long as you didn’t go in the water and I thought, I can be by myself for a whole day. I couldn’t believe it and it was just like heaven to me. Every year when I would go back I’d watch for that day; I’d wait for it.

Vera longed for her allotted alone time to freely explore her world on her own, to be herself. Most of the participants were granted early freedoms; they were trusted to learn on their own. Harold shared the gift of his mother’s trust in his ability to cope when she
let him go off cross-country skiing unattended: “That was a real gift that gave me certain kind of confidences about being able to take care of myself in situations.” Echoed throughout these comments was the concept of a gradual building of confidence in the participants’ ability to deal with life; a sense that they felt equipped to weather life’s storms.

**Learning and transformation.** Vera spoke of the importance of learning on your own: “I think it’s really important to learn from your experiences and, you know, to make decisions based on what you’ve learned.” In our discussions concerning a good life, Vera added, “Whatever a good life is, maybe it comes from having bad experiences and learning from them as much as deciding on good ones.” Allen talked about learning from one’s failures. He at one time had a sign above his desk that said, “It is a mistake to suppose that man succeeds through success. He most often succeeds through failure.” He added, “I think adversity is a great teacher. . . . I think adversity can build character.” Stephen concurred, “A lot of it has to do with learning from your mistakes.”

These participants are life-long active learners. They make concerted efforts to reflect on their experiences, positive or negative, and learn from them. Harold spoke of reflection when he said:

> There have been occasions when I have simply . . . made an almost random decision or acted on impulse. If it turned out well I look back on it and say, that’s worth remembering . . . but if it turned out badly then I say, I won’t ever do that again. Thus you gain experience and you build a repertoire of do’s and don’ts.

Stephen also spoke of the continuous and iterative learning process that results from reflection on past positive and negative experiences.
I think there has to be an element of tenacity to that and confidence that you’ve made a previous wise decision based on learning something from your previous blunders and then you accumulate the courage to be tenacious and then lo and behold you did something wise.

Assimilation of past experience with new learning results not only in better actions but in transformation. Stephen spoke to our ongoing evolution and transformation through active learning.

Well, I think it’s something that happens whether we want it to or not. We’re transformed by our interactions with other people. We’re transformed by our experiences and our own insights to those experiences. I think transformation makes me think of growth, that we hope we continue life-long learning and continue to grow as a person on an emotional and spiritual and intellectual level. I like to think that transformation is a healthy thing; that maintaining the status quo would be boring.

Anne, Rachael, and Harold also brought forward the concept of transformation. Harold said, “a wise act almost always alters the nature of the connections that preceded it.” Anne confirmed that, in her opinion: “Any action you do transforms how you are maybe going to respond the next time.” Rachael, as she described her practice of “keeping time” in the service of others, related that the meditative process often resulted in a transformative experience for her.

**Intention.** Active learning resulting in knowledge acquisition is an intentional process. The group of wise nominees discussed the subjects of consciousness, choice, and reflection in relation to intention. Stephen on the subject of reflection spoke of taking the time to reflect before taking action:

I think that a lot of good decisions whether they are wise or not aren’t snap decisions. Very few important decisions have to be handled right away. . . . You think about it a little and I think the really big decisions, not the everyday
decisions, but the bigger decisions, I think as we accumulate some experience we take a little more time thinking about it.

However, Deborah cautioned against becoming stalled during the reflection and decision making period. Her remarks spoke about balance and moderation, which were hallmarks of all the participants’ remarks throughout our six discussions. Deborah said:

I think reflection can be useful and it can be debilitating. So, moderation maybe helps a little bit. There is reflection looking back and the only word I come up with is ‘pre-flection’—is that forethought, it is where you take what you learn from the past, look at a situation and maybe do a little bit of weighing it out, the pros and cons. If you can take reflection, bring it forward, see how something could possibly evolve, then that can be helpful as long as you don’t get stuck and never make a decision.

Deborah was speaking of using past experiences to project future outcomes. Harold added his approval of Deborah’s use of the word pre-flection. “The notion of bowing to the future is really—it has a lovely kind of oriental martial arts flavour—pre-flection, it’s very good.” Anne added a third dimension to the word reflection when she spoke of reflecting on her actions in real time; thinking during doing. “You are sort of asking yourself questions, you know, are my values right or what am I missing.” Vera also spoke of intentional thinking during the doing. “I think with a lot of these wise acts that it’s not a case of thinking a lot beforehand, but it’s a case of listening to your inside and saying, yes this is the right thing to do for you at the time.” These participants were speaking of acting with intention and of how the art of thinking and reflection plays a role before, after, and during their actions.

Deborah addressed the relational role of consciousness with wise action. “If consciousness means mindfulness and mindfulness means attending to the moment and
relating that to past experiences then maybe consciousness/mindfulness says there’s a way to be intentional in doing a wise act.” Tessa added that “you have that ability with consciousness to consider others” and that “for an act to be wise you should choose carefully.” Again, choice implies intention. Vera spoke of the privilege of choice, accountability, and learning from one’s actions:

If you make a choice for yourself, you’re the one responsible for it. If it doesn’t work out, you have the ability and hopefully will use it to figure out what went wrong and learn from it and do better next time. So, I think it’s really important to protect your ability to have choice.

Intention and conscious choice were clearly evident in the practices of the participants, as discussed in the previous chapter. Although these subjects were addressed with respect to wise acts, there seemed to be a very fine line between the roles of intention versus intuition with regards to wise action.

**Intuition.** Anne offered this insight as we discussed the concept of intuition and spontaneous actions:

Although an act may seem to be spontaneous, what has led to it is a lot of knowledge and background thinking that’s gone on that makes us, what seems spontaneous, but it’s not made in isolation. It’s that whole background of knowledge and thought that you’ve done previously.

Rachael added:

To me wisdom isn’t always a thought-out process. It’s a much more spontaneous experience. . . I really believe that the unconscious is the storehouse of all our experiences. So, when we have an insightful moment, it’s often coming just from that storehouse of experiences.
Harold offered much the same explanation regarding acting impulsively—acting without apparent intention or awareness—he added that possibly the spontaneity originates from a lifetime of entrenched behaviours:

One of the characteristics that I think makes it hard for us to remember or recognize a wise act is that they are almost invariably unselfconscious. We don’t sit—I certainly have never sat and said, now what would be wise for me to do? I’ll go one step further; I think self-conscious or lacking consciousness comes because it’s rooted in very strong principles and beliefs and so it’s part of how you behave every day.

These participants were attempting to describe how a wise action often appears to be spontaneous or intuitive. An example of an intuitive reaction to a situation was a wise act I witnessed during our third discussion group. The participants went round the table sharing their wise act experiences. When it was Allen’s turn, he started his sharing with his decision to leave high school at age 13. He talked about events that followed in his life. He finished his narrative by telling us how at one point he was in the hospital, and he refused to accept some prescribed cancer treatments. (He had a PhD in Experimental Medicine so his treatment refusal was based on personal knowledge.) Allen continued his story by sharing with us that his son was admitted into the hospital at the same time as he was there. His son unfortunately was dealing with his own and a different form of cancer. Allen eventually recovered and left the hospital but sadly his son at the age of 39 did not recover; he passed away while in the hospital. As Allen told this story, this very private gentleman became visibly upset. A poignant silence fell over the group. I for one did not know how to react. I was sitting diagonally across from this emotional man. My inclination was to jump up, cross the room, and give him a hug. I realized this action was
totally inappropriate. So this awkward silence hung in the air while Allen tried his best to compose himself and the rest of the group tried to figure out how best to handle this situation. Harold who was sitting right next to Allen lightened the mood with a comment, “oh there’s a category of wise act that is categorized here and it’s called refusing treatment.” Those were Harold’s words. The others around the table kind of chuckled. Allen was able to compose himself. Then Harold and Allen carried on a light-hearted conversation about refusing treatment. I questioned Harold during our last interview to decipher if he was aware of how emotional Allen was at that time. What follows is our verbatim dialogue as I tried to sort out Harold’s intention or intuition behind what appeared to be rescue words in that situation:

Connie: Allen was able to compose himself and, between the two of you, you carried on a conversation about refusing treatment. So, my question for you, were you aware of how emotional Allen was?

Harold: No, I wasn’t.

Connie: You were not?

Harold: No.

Connie: Okay, I wanted to know if you intentionally interrupted that tension.

Harold: Yes.

Connie: You did?

Harold: Yes.

Connie: That was intentional?

Harold: No, if you mean that I said to myself, oh this is terrible; I have to intervene and break the silence—no. I love silence.

Connie: Okay.

Harold: And it was something—this is what I call an impulsive spirit.

Connie: Right.

Harold: Okay, I was moved to do this. This did not initiate with me.

Connie: Okay, can you hold on because I want to make sure I get this because I saw that in my way as a mini wise action?

Harold: Yes.

Connie: And I was wondering what your awareness of it was.
Harold: I had no awareness of it whatsoever other than I was moved to do it and that it might be a helpful remark to make because we were talking about wise acts that we had done and so on and to put it into a context—a more general context—and in fact refusing treatment is letting go of a cherished notion. I’d already mentioned that as a category because when we’re sick a cherished response is to take the treatment that the experts in that illness recommend. I had refused treatment—

Connie: Yeah, you gave a couple of examples—you had said that there were a couple of times.

Harold: Yeah, and haven’t yet caused regrets.

[Laughter]

Connie: Yet!

Harold: So, but the intentionality is zero always to the best of my knowledge. You know, there’s things maybe going on in the background that you don’t really know, but I had not said to myself, oh my—Allen is distressed and maybe I can say something that will sort of allow people to react and give him time and move on. That happened, but that was not any part of any pre-planning, or thought or intentionality on my part. I really feel it was like one of those things that you’re led to do.

Connie: Okay and we often talked about intuition as being a kind of important part of this. Like, you have a background of experience and then—

Harold: Yeah.

Connie: Maybe without thinking—

Harold: Something pops in, yeah.

Connie: But, even though you said you didn’t intentionally do that, but you were aware of how that allowed him to compose himself in the end.

Harold: Yeah, it was an amazing story. Yeah, I became aware, but the point of intention suggests some kind of pre-planning.

Connie: Right.

Harold: What do they call it in a criminal act, you know.

Connie: Yeah, right, premeditation or whatever.

Harold: Yeah, so that wasn’t there and I see it had all those characteristics. I’m not sure what intuition means in that respect, but it’s a very useful word for those kinds of insights and maybe decisions or actions which bubble up out of the whole body of one’s experience and without being screened through any kind of rational process.
I asked the remaining six participants during our final one-on-one interviews, if they remembered the incident with Allen’s emotional sharing and how Harold had stepped in. They all remembered and, like me, felt like a witness to a wise act that had unfolded before our eyes. On the grand scale of things, this was a relatively minor and insignificant act; the type of everyday wise action that we might encounter in life.

Rachael speaking generally on this subject of intuitive knowing and acting said:

The unconscious is seen as the repository of all life experiences. So, if we come to a crossroad like that, if you spontaneously make a gesture that’s appropriate, it’s coming from that unconscious life experience. I see it as some kind of wonderful container that when spontaneously responded, you’re responding with the sum total of your experiences and obviously that day you intuitively reached into the unconscious, pulled it out and there it was.

Vera too attempted to address the intuitive aspect of some wise actions. She began her statement with a question:

If you’re involved in a wise act, how do you feel about it? I think there’s something that tells you that it’s okay or, you know, it’s a positive thing and I don’t know where it comes from. There’s some small voice maybe [chuckle], but I think that has to do with, you know, if you pay attention to your intuition that it kind of leads you that way.

**Pattern 2: Self-in-Relation-to-Other**

**Liking/loving Others.** This group of wise participants related through their shared stories that they had the capacity for love. The subject of liking and loving people was raised multiple times throughout the study by the participants. In particular, it was brought up as we discussed one’s ability to perform wise acts. Stephen offered, “If an individual, for whatever reason, chooses to be a selfish person, I question their ability to be able to be wise if the centre of their focus is themselves.” Implicit in Stephen’s
comment is that the structure of a wise act by its very nature involves others. There is a generous beneficial component to a wise act. Harold’s insight on this subject was the following:

I don’t think it’s possible to do something wise without a kind of magnanimous generosity because you’re really giving something away that might be helpful to somebody else and why would you bother unless you’re motivated in some way by a generous spirit.

Allen during our second interview quietly but knowingly advised that for one to perform wisely, “You have to like people. I mean, it’s important. If you like people and you want to help. I like people because I remember good people that helped me.” Deborah too shared her love for people. “I loved working with people, with children.” A general liking and loving of humanity seemed to reside with this group of nominated wise individuals.

**Listening.** The art of listening as articulated by the study’s participants was paramount in connecting with others in a meaningful way and paramount in contributing to one’s ability to act wisely. In our first interview, Anne offered, “I am a good listener and I think . . . you have to hear what people are trying to say, you have to read beyond the message in a way.” She added, “People have to feel that you really value them . . . that you value them and their opinions.” Rachael was adamant about listening in a special way. In fact one of her reasons for agreeing to participate in this research was to find out what others thought of the skill of listening and its connection to wisdom. During our first group discussion, the participants were asked to choose pictures from a large selection that spoke to them of wisdom. Rachael chose two pictures that depicted listening and spoke of the finesse of listening; the art of listening behind the words.
One’s listening capacities are hugely important. If we are able to listen carefully and take that information and then still have other questions, then it feels to me as if we can get closer to the intention or the wish of the person we are speaking to. As a therapist, your listening capacity can make it possible for you to hear the words that are latent with emotions and then you go back and say, well tell me more about that pain that you were describing or that person that hurt you.

As we discussed wise exemplars, Rachael vividly described how Jean Vanier appeared to be physically leaning towards Mother Theresa in his act of listening during an interview Rachael saw him conduct with Mother Theresa:

What I loved was the way Vanier bent to really negotiate to be present. It was a kind of leaning into the spirit of Mother Theresa, and it’s an image that I carry with me because—not that I think we need to physically lean into people, but I think that emotionally it’s hugely important to lean toward people. With Vanier’s image, that had a huge effect on me at the time.

Deborah on a couple of occasions spoke of the need to listen attentively so as to be able to know how to provide advice or offer assistance.

When I was doing work with a person who was not raised in Canada and he was explaining grief with losing a member of his family, I had no understanding of grieving within the Chinese culture and I found myself having to be very attentive to listening and inviting conversation without asking directly.

During Deborah’s discussion about her chosen wise act (see Table 8), she credited her listening skills rather than her counselling expertise when she said, “I think the wisdom was listening. I don’t know that it was a wise act; I think it was the listening.”

**Impact.** For this group of wise nominees, the effect on others was a major determinant for what constituted a wise act. In fact, what differentiates a wise act from any other ordinary action can be seen in hindsight from the positive impact of the action. Deborah offered, “The only way I can conclude that something was wise on my part is if
I get feedback to suggest it had a positive impact on someone else.” She noted that, before taking action, “I always think how is this going to affect this other person.” Tessa suggested that “maybe wisdom is noticed when it’s done in a manner that takes into account how it’s going to affect other people,” while Anne said, “when you’re making a decision, knowing what others think is really important because it’s not only whatever you’re going to do, but then how it’s going to play out.” These participants are attentive and respectful of others who might be impacted by their actions. Vera cautioned that, even though you might assume you consider the impact of your actions on others, you cannot always know with certainty how things will play out:

If you attempt to benefit others, you may think that from your point of view that’s going to be a benefit to them, but may not be from their point of view. So, you’re making judgments based on your value system and not somebody else’s.

These participants demonstrated an awareness of others. Harold indicated that a wise act by its very nature serves others:

Any wise act, in my view, is bound to do good for the immediate surrounding community. It may only be two or three people, it may include the actor, but it can’t possibly be self-serving . . . there’s no doubt that the wise actor benefits from the wise act, but that’s not the motive. That’s not the primary motive for doing it.

With the wise act that Deborah chose to share concerning one of her students, she had the good fortune to receive direct feedback from that student many years later, but she also lived the impact of her actions. Deborah explained:

I was pretty honoured to have played some role there. The impact on others, I think word got around. I hadn’t said anything about it at the school, but it turns out after that . . . there was a stream of students who came forward with issues ranging from addictions, to sexual assault, to families kicking them out, to
students coming out and trying to resist the system. So the result, a safe place for discussion was created.

**The Role of the Witness**

Deborah described the valuable role a witness plays with regards to a wise act. She spoke specifically of the beneficiary and witness to the wise act she shared (see Table 8):

There are two parts of it, that in order for an act to be viewed as wise someone has to observe it and consider it wise and relay that back to you. Because if you never get the feedback that something was useful, productive, wise, considerate, thoughtful, humorous—whatever the characteristic of the action is—without feedback, you’d never know. You could imagine; you know what your intent was, but you don’t know what the outcome was. So that’s why you need a witness who can—in some way—convey the impact of what it was you did. And that’s what I think my student did.

In the above case, Deborah spoke of the value of the role that feedback plays in the process, but she also credited the receptivity of the witness as a contributing factor in the making of a wise act. “I think it might have a little bit to do with the receptivity of the person who is a witness to what is going on. . . . It’s not the person doing it as much as the person receiving it.” Deborah added, “How many times have I said, maybe put the same question to somebody, in the same way. They weren’t ready or they weren’t able [to receive] and it didn’t work out so well.”

These comments about the role of the witness shifted my thinking to consider the communal aspects of a wise act; the shared responsibility of wise act occurrence. As Vera tried to analyze how one assesses if an action is wise or not, she too mused about the role of others in that determination:
I don’t think you can determine, even if you’re interested in determining what your own wise acts are (or somebody else does) it doesn’t happen until after the event occurs and kind of the response of people to it and it’s through that, I think, and maybe your own feeling about it afterwards that determines whether it’s wise or not.

It appears that the individual who initiates an act and the witness both play an essential role in wise enactment. However, what has not been explored through this research and what definitely needs to be considered for future research is the weight and role of these players in the making of a wise act. The initiator, often considered a wise person by the community, is but one part of the equation. The witness must be an open receptacle, be part of the interaction and follow through with the action, or wisdom will not occur. If we think in the plural sense, the community has to be open and ready to receive for an action to be deemed wise. We have many examples in history where individuals have been ridiculed or worse executed for their ideas or actions that in hindsight have been believed to be wise. For example, Socrates, credited as one of the founders of Western Philosophy and proclaimed to be wise during his lifetime by the Oracle of Delphi, was sentenced to death for supposedly corrupting the youth of Athens with his ideas. The community at large was not ready to heed his advice, receive his ideas, or follow his suggestions. Only many years later was Socrates’ wisdom recognized.

Wise acts are a community affair. The catalyst of a possible wise act initiates an action from a deep place of knowing. However, the witness also plays an important role in bringing that act to fruition. The witness’ receptivity and feedback are important
components of the action. If the witness is not open or receptive to the ideas initiated, then the act may remain unexecuted, unrecognized, and its benefits may not be felt.

**Chapter Summary**

Throughout this chapter, I have reported how the participants balance forethought with their personal life experiences to enable wise action. At times, these wise nominees measuredly consider the impact of their actions before putting things into motion but there are other times when an element of mystery seems present, and experience takes the lead. This group of wise nominees find themselves at times acting almost intuitively from a deep place of knowing. No matter how their actions are initiated, these wise nominees reflect on and judge their actions on the outcomes, feedback, and impact they have on others. Their shared experiences indicate there is no clear formula for the making of a singular wise act or the development of the capability for wise action. What they share is that their reactions to a life situation are complex, balanced, and dependent on the uniqueness of the situation and the other individuals involved in that situation.

The important role of the witness has been introduced in this chapter and is further discussed in the last chapter of this dissertation.
Chapter 7

Findings: The Relational Complexity of It All

Wisdom remains a mystery to many of us. Yet, as reported by Takahashi and Bordia (2000) in a cross-cultural comparative study, ‘wise’ is the most liked descriptor for an ideal self. We may aspire to be wise, but the phenomenon of wisdom is proving to be difficult to understand as has been shown in the review of the wisdom literature in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Academics have been exploring and attempting to define and explain this phenomenon for decades, with no consensus. I called upon the study’s wise nominees to describe, through pictures and stories, their understandings of the development of wisdom and the relationship of wise acts and wise practices to wisdom. The nominees’ descriptions bring to light a variety of perspectives on these topics. Although no strong consensus is derived from these exercises, interesting ideas on the processes of the evolution, expression, and expectation of wisdom are offered.

At the end of this final findings chapter and before we move on to the discussion segment of this dissertation in Chapter 8, I bring the reader back to the story of the Seven Grandfathers and their teachings, which was introduced in Chapter 4. Readers are left to determine for themselves if those seven teachings apply to this group of wise nominees.

**Participants’ Understandings of the Development of Wisdom**

Six of the eight participants drew pictures of the development of wisdom that they allowed me to keep as data. It was clear from the resulting diagrams and their accompanying explanations that wisdom is a vast multi-dimensional phenomenon that
can be viewed in many ways. Their diagrams were drawn impromptu during our fifth group discussion session without regard for their aesthetic beauty but as a fun thinking exercise. The diagrams are revealing about the complexity of the thinking of these wise nominees and speak of their willingness to be spontaneous and to share regardless of their artistic talents.

I had secured large sheets of pad board paper to the walls in our discussion room. The participants got up from our conversation table, selected a few markers, and began drawing a representation of how they saw wisdom develop. Descriptions of the participants’ diagrams follow.

**Figure 2: Harold's Diagram of the Development of Wisdom**
Harold’s diagram is complicated as he drew not one but three ways of looking at the development of personal wisdom. He first drew a scale along the side representing a human’s life span 0-100 as a percentage representative of wisdom. At birth, wisdom potential was 100% and wisdom practice 0%. Around the 89th mark, Harold reversed the numbers with wisdom potential of 11% and wisdom practice at 89%. He said of his second and main diagram that pictures the development of wisdom as a network:

You don’t have to stay on the same path, and so you begin to build a picture, a map if you like, in which the various paths are linked together and that becomes a network. My image for accumulating wisdom—and I think there is an accumulation—but I see it not as bound to one particular line, but having a broader kind of potential. Essentially it’s a network.

He noted on his diagram that some paths functioned as blind ends that did not lead to anything constructive. He marked those with an X; some other paths were not taken, which he marked with a question mark. His third representation is of an individual inflating a wisdom balloon.

Harold’s diagram of a network is quite different from Deborah’s swirling circular type diagram with interconnected spiraling circles.
Deborah described her diagram as follows:

I’m assuming people are born with the capacity to be wise. My diagram is a little bit like a snail’s shell, so it’s around and around and around and around until such time as we leave, but it should be pictured as three-dimensional. There are always opportunities, challenges, forks, or whatever you want to call them. Sometimes you can jump from one level to the other and move back again. . . . All the other circles around me are other people living their lives. I put them on the outside only because to put them on the front would have been confusing, but again, three-dimensional all around. So, at any one time the opportunity for one person to exercise wisdom in practice is probably a reflection of what they’ve observed or learned from someone else and the wisdom might be attributed to the person in the middle but in fact I think it’s a shared experience and the wisdom could just as easily be attributed to one of the outside ones.
Vera’s diagram much like Deborah’s includes others as central to the development of wisdom. In Vera’s diagram, she pictures individuals sharing ideas that merge into a group of ideas and that group of ideas merges with others.

Vera explained:

You know how you do clouds for voices in comics? So, three people down there each have some ideas represented by dots. They all get together and join up. They share some of the ideas, and they create some more, demonstrated by the purple dots. One person has the purple cloud and so on and then after a while you find that they join up with other groups that’s going to be up there who have some of their ideas and everybody else becomes a bigger group—a more complex resource you might say.
Figure 5: Tessa's Diagram of the Development of Wisdom

Tessa drew a personal time line representing her life, which is drawn on an upward incline. Central to her description, like Deborah’s and Vera’s, is the importance of others in her personal wisdom development process.

I started with the little baby and the mother who is looking down saying, this is the most beautiful baby in the world. I got to be made special, but then there were six of us. That’s where the struggle began. Then you learn a lot, I just drew one school, but it’s a couple of schools. I saw it as learning more and learning more and then the hospital where I worked and learning more. More experiences, but everywhere in each of these settings there was community, starting in my very small home-town. Then, growing and gathering from all of those people and doing various things and then getting to a point where you’re in the period of reflection on all of that. Then, at the point of looking back, which is where I find myself right now in some ways, and gaining things all along.
Rachael’s diagram like Tessa’s also represents a personal time line drawn as ‘a yellow brick road’ on an upward incline. She related her diagram entirely to the volunteer work in her life and said of her volunteer work that it had created a “sense of harmony” for her. She described her diagram as follows:

I’m depicting the volunteering side of my life, not my professional life and I feel that the volunteering part of it has been such a huge learning journey. I have myself in different art situations. The second one here, is of a group of dancers with music; next is another group of artists and the sky was the limit with those artists so I tried to create some kind of a sunny sky there. Then, the last part probably is the most meaningful because my recent volunteering has been with veterans with post-traumatic stress and they really yearn to live in isolation when they have PTSD. They want a light-house to live in or some kind of walled area, so I think much of the yellow brick road was leading toward this work. So, I hesitated to put it in, but I feel that it’s been one of my big learning curves, but it still has the sense of being on the yellow brick road.
Anne chose to demonstrate people’s abilities at wise action as three levels of differentiated capacity. Each capacity level is determined by the impact of one’s actions.

I have a hard time thinking of one definition for wisdom, so I drew three paths. One being just sort of separate acts of wisdom, but they’re really connected. They are looked at as individual segments and it could be a person’s life. Maybe not a clear idea of how many people are impacted, but knowing that it does have an impact. The second one is that whole life that someone actually grows in wisdom. There are some down turns when they do unwise things [chuckle], but generally it’s upward, they get wiser or make better judgments as they go on. The third, I really like that concept of those amazing people who make a difference in our society like Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King. Basically, they sort of move through life influencing more and more people along the way as they go. Sometimes they make poor judgments along the way, but in the end they really have a great societal impact on people and they are looked on as particularly wise because they’ve impacted most people.
The participants’ descriptions of the development of wisdom address an accumulation of learning from shared experiences, the influence of family and community, the importance of reflection, the role of wise exemplars, and the impact of one’s actions.

**Participants’ Understandings of the Relationship amongst Wise Acts, Wise Practices, and Wisdom**

Rachael noted that “wise acts, wise practice, and wisdom they are all intertwined and . . . are all acting together.” This section presents some of the relational ideas held by the wise nominees that provide varied insights into the structure, sequence, and links among wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom.

Well, I think a wise act would be an individual—like a single thing. Wise practice would be a group of things which supported each other….We are going from the small to the large. But, wisdom would have to be all wise acts and, you know, all wise practice I think. (Vera)

So Vera saw wisdom as the broader view of wise acts and practice as did Harold:

Wisdom is the over-arching quality, a useful noun, that characterizes whatever elements in the acts and practice are in common and recognized as being wise. . . . It’s the noun that attempts to capture the essential characteristics that are common in a whole bunch of different acts, done by different people, at different times and places, under all kinds of different circumstances. This thing they have in common we call wisdom.

Both Stephen and Tessa saw wise acts resulting from wise practice. Stephen said, “I think wise practice might be considered a habit” and “I think wise acts come out of or are a product of wise practice.” Tessa agreed with Stephen. She said “It all comes back to wise practice being something that people try to do consciously . . . that could lead to wise acts.”
Deborah offered her explanation of the relationship of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom. She, like the others, saw a cycle of practice leading to wise action and discussed the roles that personal reflection and external feedback play with respect to wisdom recognition.

Practice would be a precursor to actually seeing a wise act. Practice is getting in there, living life, assuming risk, observing what worked and what didn’t. And then you see the difference between that and what didn’t work, or failure. You don’t get annoyed about the failure, you just put it into your frame of reference and say, okay, let’s choose a behaviour that leads to more success; so, seeing the difference between success and failure factors into future practices. So you’re still practicing, you see the ones that worked and the ones that were deemed to be wise, feedback from other people and all of that, and then you keep on doing the practice, you keep on doing the acts and—over time—you accumulate this body of life work that seems, on balance, seems to have more positive effect and change, than negative. That’s wisdom.

For these wise nominees, part of the process of acquiring and demonstrating wisdom involves learning from and considering others. Vera suggested that you “identify people that you consider are wise people, then you can use them as a model to learn about wisdom.” Deborah offered that “maybe in the learning about it [wisdom], we come a little closer to it and it can be a part of our everyday life.” Deborah added that “I think [wisdom is] an accumulation of things that you learn, that people learn from you, that you then get information back, that you then adjust, so it has to be processed.” Harold offered this piece about the inclusion of others in the wisdom process and the art of letting go.

To me wisdom or a wise act or decision may well be coincident with or require self-control, but it almost always does not exert external control. It may have external influence, which is different. It may have a persuasive or other kind of quality, but that would have impact on other people. But, it’s not control in a dictatorial kind of way because for me an awful lot of wisdom is about letting go.
I’ve been hearing that sort of around the group. It’s accommodating other people and you’re in the play, but you’re a part of the team; you’re not a soloist, so to me that self-control, yeah, but external influence and persuasion and things like that, but not control.

Rachael’s words summed up what she had taken in from the wise act stories shared by the participants during our discussions. “All the examples were so different, but unless those people had been listening and looking and feeling in sympathy with the situation, it wouldn’t have worked. Wisdom would not have surfaced.”

A new idea for me emerged from further discussions with both Harold and Anne concerning the expectation of wisdom that might evolve after wisdom has surfaced. They both offered that, if one gains a reputation for being wise because of one’s wise actions, then an expectation of wisdom is born and may be perpetuated. Harold said, “One [wise act] leads to another, to another, to another. So, even though nobody is wise 100 percent of the time continually, nevertheless, one might expect wisdom to appear—when it appears once, they might expect it to appear again.” Harold’s quote about the expectation of wisdom was a new thought for me and the more I thought about it, I could see how wise action can take on a life of its own with expectation feeding the cycle. If you gain a reputation for being wise, then there is an expectation of further wise action and so on.

Anne described her version of the process of wise action and process ending with a scenario that included the expectation of wisdom:

Well a wise act is a one time; I mean it is defined by time. Wise practice I see as having several wise acts within it that shows that it’s really not just an accident, but it is sort of something that may be leading somewhere. And then wisdom is being able to look over a span, a long span, and say that wisdom has been demonstrated through these wise acts and practices. And wisdom, I think, you
would then start looking to that person and paying greater attention after observing wise acts and wise practice. Then people would be looking maybe to that person for wisdom.

I pressed Anne to clarify her understanding of the expectation of wisdom. She agreed with my synopsis that others see what they determine to be wise; they continue looking to that individual for advice, for commitment, for wise decisions, for wise actions in general. Then the impact and influence of that individual increases, becomes greater because of her or his reputation for wise action. In other words, individuals’ reputation for being wise creates receptivity and anticipation for more wise action.

The participants’ descriptions of the relationship of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom are varied and insightful. Our group discussions brought forward a host of ideas including that wisdom is a process, wise practices are consciously and consistently followed, wise acts are singular incidents of wisdom, reflection and feedback play a role in the wisdom process, and an external expectation of wisdom may evolve.

As Harold suggested, “wisdom is a useful noun that characterizes whatever elements in the acts and practice are in common and recognized as being wise.” Wisdom is that all-encompassing noun we use to describe a phenomenon that is quite inexplicable. It is interesting that we use a noun to describe what in the analysis appears to be a complex process involving years of practice and the potential eruption of wise acts that may lead to the recognition of wisdom. Wisdom, from the discussions with this group of wise nominees, seems to be so much more of an action word, more of a verb than a noun.
Living the Seven Grandfather Teachings

Before I leave this chapter, I return to the story of the Seven Grandfathers that was introduced to me by Harold and shared in Chapter 4. I wondered if the data collected for this study revealed elements of the Seven Grandfathers’ teachings. According to that story, “The people became better adjusted physically to live on Earth. The people had a sense of hope that gave them the strength to face life’s daily tasks” (Benton-Banai, 1988, p. 66). Searching through the data, I did find evidence that these wise nominees live with hope and the positive strength to face life’s daily tasks. So, in spite of not originally collecting data with this intent, I present some of the wise nominees’ characteristics under the headings of the Seven Grandfather Teachings or the Seven Sacred Teachings (Bouchard & Martin, 2013): humility, honesty, respect, courage, wisdom, truth, and love

Humility

Harold said of the group, “I noted the value of humility . . . it seems to me that people in the group . . . all had a touch of humility.” I cannot say why the presence of humility existed within this group of accomplished individuals but I felt its palpable presence during our group discussions. The humility of these wise nominees can perhaps be credited to their awareness that they are one part of a connected whole. The theme of connectedness with others and the planet is powerful throughout these data. Rachael said, “I feel as if I belong to some great circle of connectedness.” Deborah spoke of her profound connections with others:

I’ve come to see that, mostly you’re living out your life with people or with creatures and if you’re working with a little puppy, or you’re working with a
child, or you’re working with an elder, it’s about the art of seeing who they are, who you are, and then, somehow coming together as you make your way.

**Honesty**

These participants were honest about their own capabilities. They move forward through life fully understanding themselves and what they have to deal with. Deborah said:

You recognize the fear in yourself, and you acknowledge it. And I think that’s part of wisdom, too, because each of us lives with fear of at least one thing, if not many things, all of our lives. And it’s reconciling that with forward movement, because to bow to fear is to be paralyzed. So, you recognize the fear and the risks involved if you do something or don’t do something and you acknowledge it’s there, and then you move forward. And that’s the process of dealing with wisdom.

Harold gave an example of how he dealt with classroom stresses and the fear of failure. “My response to being afraid of failure or of events in the classroom getting out of control or whatever it might be, was to rehearse—thorough planning with rehearsal.”

Anne, in explaining how she dealt with her employees in the workplace, spoke of understanding her own role in facing situations.

I think when you have a good understanding of yourself and the belief in my role that if things didn’t go well I had to share the blame, so I never blamed people when things didn’t go well. I always felt it was part of my responsibility.

These participants recounted making efforts to know themselves and faced situations with an honest perspective of what they brought to the table.

**Respect**

These participants respect others. Vera said, “I think you can respect people that have different ideas than you do.” Anne reported that “people have to know you really
respect them, that you care what they think.” Harold said, “One of the things I got was, mostly from my dad—and this was something that just made so much sense and I didn’t ever kind of question it, and that was a conviction of the equality of all persons.” But it wasn’t only respect for people that these individuals speak of and demonstrate; they clearly have a profound respect for nature as in Allen’s words of appreciation for morning sunrises. Rachael spoke almost mystically of her connection to a region in Ireland where she returns annually to spend weeks walking amongst the limestone and low-lying mountains. She said, “I sink into nature, sink into the walking, and sink into the quiet.” She told of laying her hands on the stone walls of “houses that are bereft of roofs and doors and all of those things. The spirit of the people are still there . . . I put my hands on the walls and I say, well I’m back.” She drew energy and found peace from her annual retreat to the land and with ancestry. These participants did articulate respect for all of creation.

**Courage**

Stories of everyday courage were shared by these participants that spoke to their strength of character and conviction of values when facing pivotal life circumstances. Several of the wise acts the individuals spoke of were about standing up to the cultural standards of the day. Harold spoke of refusing to strap a student when at the time it was the expected punishment. In the end, his anti-strapping stance was recognized and embraced by his school’s administration. Harold said:

In a world that really wants us to conform, to be continually confirmed or affirmed in your resistance to conforming is a pretty nice thing to have happen in
the face of that pressure to always do the expected thing, the right thing, the normal thing.

Allen told stories of his own standing up against the norms of the day: “There are rules that you have to bypass on occasion.” He related how he quit school at the age of 13 to go out and work because he did not appreciate the treatment he was receiving. Vera spoke of her own experiences and said, “I guess I must have some courage or something or other.” In one exercise, the group chose pictures that represented wisdom to them. Tessa said of the image she chose of an intense woman steering a boat, “she looks so determined and she also looks very courageous.” For Tessa, courage represented wisdom. She spoke against conformity and for courage when she said, “there’s a tremendous pressure for people to conform, which can be really destructive.” The courage to deal with life situations from valued standpoints is evident from the participants’ narratives.

Wisdom

This group of wise nominees shared that they took part in this study to learn about wisdom. Curiosity, love of learning, and knowledge acquisition were overriding factors in the participants’ decisions to partake in this research study. Rachael said, “I have a sense of curiosity . . . it’s a kind of strength curiosity is.” Interest in the topic of wisdom, even in the magnitude and the history of the word itself, were reasons given for wanting to participate. The nominees were curious about the roles that listening skills, empathy, and respect play in wisdom. In various ways they said they were generally enthused about the opportunity to exchange ideas with interesting and stimulating people. So part
of their logic for participating in this study stemmed from their hope that some learning would result from their invested time. Not only did these wise nominees demonstrate a desire to learn about this particular topic of wisdom but they could be classified as having a general love of learning. Vera said, “They used to call me the question girl because I asked a lot of questions. I think my dad was like that and I still ask a lot of questions.” These wise nominees are seekers of knowledge. Stephen said, “I try to get as much information as I can, make a decision after having given it good thought and then live with it.” Rachael, who spoke of what she takes into consideration before taking action, offered, “Well, I’m going to need to go after some insight to begin with.” Deborah said, “I feel that I’m a person who really enjoys learning quite a bit. I love hearing what other people have to say. I find that life experience probably fuels my interest as much as anything else.” Again with respect to experiential learning, Deborah related that one of the things her dad liked about her was “I would try everything.” This group of wise nominees could definitely be classified as life-long learners who cherished knowledge and sought wisdom. They were nominated for their wise actions by their peers so, by community standards, they are considered carriers of wisdom. At a minimum, they seek to know wisdom.

**Truth**

In Chapter 4, the participants’ ideas of the importance of living authentically were described in detail. These wise nominees demonstrated they live aligning their actions with their values. Authentic living could be considered living with truth.
Love

All but one of this group of wise nominees had long-term marriages that provided support as did their families of origin. Tessa said of her marriage, “I married a wonderful person who seems to—our personalities and our skills and our, you know, pluses and minuses, seem to balance out quite well.” Stephen spoke very lovingly of his wife, “I’ve been married for 40 years but I’ve been in love with her for 45 years,” and of his children he said, “My children are wonderful people. We like being around each other.” Allen said:

What I really want to talk about that was a wise act, and the first one, I thought initially really was my wife; she was the wisest act I’ve ever made. I’m 59 years married and without her and her incredible kind heart and intellect I just wouldn’t be anywhere.

Clearly this group of individuals is open with their demonstrated capacity for love. But love comes in many forms and inadvertently they spoke of love in different ways. Tessa, from her role as politician, spoke about a general respect and love for humankind wanting to provide a voice for those who do not have a voice. Deborah and her husband developed their giving gardens, providing loving information about hospice care. Love permeates the lives of these participants in various demonstrated ways.

Clayton and Birren (1980) called for research to examine what about wisdom is universal. Perhaps the universality of wisdom can be found in the shared characteristics and behaviours of those individuals who are recognized by others as wise.
Chapter Summary

This chapter brings to a close the findings of this study. Chapter 4 introduced the participants and now in full circle in this chapter, we come back to evidence of how these wise nominees live their lives. These four chapters have chronicled the collected data that provide some insight into the lived experiences of these wise nominees and their understandings of wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom. We move on from here to the final discussion chapter where I interpret the findings and present them as a cohesive whole.
Chapter 8

Pulling It All Together

My approach to most projects is to first partition the subject matter under examination into manageable components. My project management style has been influenced by both my analytical nature and my professional work history of developing implementation strategies to execute strategic plans for businesses and not-for-profit organizations. I employed this same approach to explore the phenomenon of wisdom. The five research questions created to guide this phenomenological study aimed to unravel the very complex phenomenon of wisdom into its component parts, while an interpretive phenomenological approach was employed to gather up the disassembled parts to make sense of the whole and present a holistic new perspective on this phenomenon that has kept humankind intrigued for centuries.

One-on-one interviews and social interactive group discussion sessions were designed to draw out answers to the five research questions from the study’s wise nominees. These eight wisdom exemplars invested themselves fully in the research process and devoted over 20 hours each of their time to this study. They shared descriptions of their lived experiences and understandings of: (a) wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom; (b) descriptions of the relationship of the three; (c) what enables their own wise actions; (d) what efforts they exert to enable and enhance their abilities to perform wise acts and conduct wise practices; and (e) what impact their wise acts and wise practices have on others and their own learning.
In-depth personal sharing of experiences and narrative histories organically evolved amongst the nominees over the course of the multiple group discussion sessions. The gaps between the six group sessions provided the participants with time to reflect on the subject matter and to build, contrast, and compare their own experiences with others. Ample one-on-one interview time was offered to all the participants before and after the discussion period to further share their personal stories and make additions to what had been discussed in our group sessions. The participants reported at the end of the data collection period that the time allocated to them between group discussions helped them to make meaning of and clarify their own understandings of the subject matter. The resulting data were both deep and nuanced.

As this study progressed, not only were the five research questions directly answered but a great deal was discovered about the characteristics, behaviours, and motivators of the study’s wise nominees. The nominees shared that they generally managed to sustain positive and grateful attitudes in spite of any life hardships they encountered. They also reported making use of humour in their lives and, in spite of their age, remaining fully engaged in life; they were active and busy people. Respectful of others, the study’s wise nominees reported feeling deeply connected to others and their natural surroundings. They were disciplined with their daily reflective practices and habits, were physically active, and made conscious efforts to align their everyday actions and behaviours with their personal values. Living authentically proved to be a hallmark of how this group of wise nominees conducted themselves. They worked to know
themselves so as to ensure that their actions matched their values. They lived with integrity and congruence. Each wise nominee made an “intentional choice to practice alignment between the inner and outer life” (Mack, 2014, p. 12).

These exemplars demonstrated they had a generous spirit. They gave of their time, they were empathetic towards others, and much of what seemed to drive these participants’ actions was “doing the right thing.” Harold decided not to strap his student in spite of advice to the contrary, and Allen chose to put his friendship with his boss aside and reported on his boss’ misconduct for the safety of clients. These men chose to put their personal comfort aside, stand against what would be considered the norms of the time, and tried to do the right thing. Many of the nominees’ characteristics and behaviours that surfaced through this study have similarly been reported in previous empirical studies of wisdom that have collected qualitative data from wise nominees (e.g., Krafcik, 2011; Lyster, 1996; Montgomery, Barber, & McKee, 2002, Taylor, 2010).

Two over-arching patterns emerged across this study’s data, which are titled “Self” and “Self-in-Relation-to-Other.” With respect to the pattern of Self, the study’s nominees worked to know themselves and to ready their minds and bodies through reflective and physical practices to best deal with life. When it came to acting wisely, the participants’ confidence and ability to take risks, balanced with both their intention and intuition, shaped their course of action. With respect to the pattern of Self-in-Relation-to-Other, these wise nominees saw themselves as part of the greater whole and made regular efforts to connect with others by staying in touch with family and friends, praying for
others, giving of their time through community service, and importantly removing themselves to commune alone in and with nature. When it came to action, the participants’ capacity for liking/loving others, being able to empathetically listen to others, and considering the impact of their own actions on others contributed to the resulting wisdom that might emerge from their wise actions.

This study’s findings are both reported and interpreted in this discussion chapter to present a new perspective of wisdom; demonstrating that quintessentially wisdom is a social phenomenon. Findings of the research questions are first presented and then, through diagram and description, the relationships amongst wise acts, wise practices, and wisdom are offered. As the chapter closes, I offer for consideration areas for future academic research and I make suggestions for incorporating the study’s findings into everyday life. I leave this discussion chapter and the study with a few concluding remarks, but it is poignant words from the participants that bring this study to a close.

**Wise Practices**

An extensive review of the literature revealed that this was the first published study that has explicitly asked wise nominees to speak of their habitual practices; the first study to examine the relationship of wise practices to wise acts and wisdom. My earlier research (Taylor, 2010) discovered through in-depth interviews with wise nominees that certain life management practices were integral to their lives (see Appendix E). This finding sparked my curiousity about the regular and ongoing practices of wise individuals. I set out specifically through this study to explore what habitual practices this
group of wise nominees engaged in, and how these practices related to and contributed to their wise actions and ultimately wisdom.

The wise nominees of this study reported conducting a variety of habitual practices; sometimes weekly, daily, or in the case of Harold’s centering prayers, multiple times a day. They spent their energy on what they could control in their lives, thereby preparing themselves to deal with what life brought their way. They did not focus as much of their energy on their reactions to life situations as they did on their conscious practices. They reported thinking carefully about their actions but, in many instances, they let their intuition guide their actions and reactions. Their practices took on many forms—meditation, prayer, communing in nature, centering breathing exercises, physical strengthening and stretching, quiet sitting, and any number of means of connecting with friends, family, and community. Their practices were conscious efforts to develop mind, body, and soul so they better knew themselves and they were able to connect more meaningfully with others. The wise actions initiated by these exemplars were facilitated by the hard work, time, and energy they spent quietly performing the habitual practices that worked for them. These participants were all diligent about their practices, and had remained faithful to conducting various forms of these practices over their life spans.

Stephen summarized what he learned from the rest of the group’s regular life practices: “Everyone set aside time purposefully to reflect and it seems to me that is a pretty good idea.” The three groups of practices identified in this study are titled: (a) Quiet Reflective Practices: Minding the Mind; (b) Physical Practices: Minding the Body;
and (c) Connecting-with-Other Practices: Feeding the Soul. All of the participants reported conducting some form of habitual practice in each of these three practice domains. Their practices resulted in temporarily removing the participants from life’s everyday bluster to rejuvenate their minds, bodies, and souls. As Anne stated to the group, “we all know what we need to do for ourselves to keep ourselves centered and balanced and that helps us to perform better in any situation.”

Answers to the five research questions, with respect to wise practices, have led not only to the descriptions of the many forms of reflective, physical, and connecting-with-others practices conducted by the wise nominees as described in detail in Chapter 5 of this study but also multiple understandings of wise practices and their relationship to wise acts and wisdom. From the reports of the participants’ direct lived experiences, it became apparent that their ongoing practices readied, prepared, or positioned them to initiate wise action. Their reported habitual practices contributed to their personal development and kept them grounded and centered so they could deal with life’s ups and downs. The diligent performance of their ongoing practices was driven because these wise nominees felt such practices were the right thing to do and had long-term effects. These ongoing practices contributed to the enablement of the nominees’ wise acts; they enabled optimal and creative reactions to life’s dilemmas and situations. Because of their contribution to wise acts and possible emergence of wisdom, the body of reflective, physical, and connecting-with-others practices as described by these wise nominees could be considered wise practices.
Wise Acts and Wisdom

Starting in the last quarter of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the early empirical investigation of wisdom primarily focused on defining or describing wisdom. The phenomenon of wisdom, as shown through the review of the literature in Chapter 2, has been studied, over the past 40 years, as a form of human development, a composite of personality traits or competencies, a form of intelligence or special expertise, or as some combination of these. Underpinning the majority of these theoretical foci is the perspective of wisdom as internal to the wise person. Oser, Schenker, and Spychiger (1999), however, offered a different perspective that suggested wisdom is external to the person and is situated.

The idea that wisdom may be an external manifestation has been alluded to throughout the wisdom literature. Philosophers and researchers alike have acknowledged there are relational and social aspects to wisdom. However, little empirical work has been undertaken to examine the social nature of wisdom. Staudinger (1996) suggested that wisdom is mostly found in cultural or social interactive products, while Lyster (1996) proposed that wisdom is a process manifested in day-to-day experiences. Yang (2008b) has also largely acknowledged that wisdom is situated. “In real life, factors that contribute to the manifestation of wisdom may not reside only within an individual. Context must also be taken into account.” (p. 274).

Viewing wisdom as a process of integration, embodiment, and positive effect, as done by Yang (2008a, 2011) in her empirical work, locates the first two components, integration and embodiment, internal to the individual, while the positive effect
component results from the external manifestation of wisdom. As such, wisdom requires
the interaction between an individual and a situational context (Sternberg, 2000).
Similarly Edmondson (2013), through her ethnographic work, sees wisdom as a process
but adds to the perspective of wisdom as being externally manifested by suggesting that
wisdom happens between people. The current phenomenological study continues,
combines, and expands upon the notions of wisdom’s external manifestation suggesting
that wisdom is solely an external manifestation. Wisdom does not reside within an
individual. Rather, wisdom is communally constructed between people in specific
contexts; wisdom has the potential to emerge as a result of a unique interaction between
individuals in specific contexts.

Although wise acts have not been specifically addressed in the literature other
than through Oser, Schenker, and Spychiger’s (1999) paper, wise acts have been
acknowledged in other research. Yang (2008a, 2008b) uses the language of incidents of
speaks of instances of wisdom. One of the foci of the current study is to specifically
examine wise acts; the intent being to learn directly from exemplars’ lived experiences.

With respect to wise acts, the study’s research questions aimed to gather
descriptions of wise acts, learn what enables wise action, understand what efforts the
participants exerted to enable and enhance wise act performance, and explore the
participants’ direct experience of the impact their wise actions had on others and
themselves. These findings are found in the following sub-section titled “Wise Acts.” The
study’s findings with regards to the participants’ descriptions of wisdom are found under the sub-section titled “Wisdom,” while the research findings that address the relationship between wise acts and wisdom are located in the sub-section titled “Relationship of Wise Acts and Wisdom.”

Wise Acts

The consensus of this study’s group of wise nominees was that we were all born with the capacity to act wisely. Yet the participants could not report on any one right path to nurture one’s capacity for wise action. This view was evidenced by the participants’ varied descriptions of wisdom’s development. Although no one right path to enable wise action was reported, this group of wise nominees did report on the efforts they expended to enable wise action and discussed the importance of the impact of their actions.

The participants reported that habitual efforts to practice conscious reflection significantly contributed to their capacity for wise action. Their life experiences, learning, family, community, and confidence in themselves were also influencing factors in their wise behaviours. The wise nominees’ willingness to be bold and to do what they believed to be the right thing also enabled their wise actions.

Of great importance to this group of wise nominees, and what was discussed on several occasions during our group discussions, was the important role that active listening played in the enablement of wise acts. Other wise act enablers reported by this group were the following: aligning their values with their actions, having confidence in themselves and being willing to take risks, reflection on and learning from their
experiences, intentional forethought, general liking and loving of humanity, and being empathetic towards others. Empathy resulted in their consideration of the impact of their actions on others. Their efforts were spent mostly on their habitual reflective, physical, and connecting with other practices that readied their minds, bodies, and souls for wise action.

A significant finding of this study was the importance of balancing intention with intuition when initiating a wise act. Intention and conscious choice were evident in the participants’ habitual life practices and their reflective tendencies, where reflection took on three forms. Reflecting post- or pre- an action is typically understood as reflection. There is also a form of reflecting during an action or to use Schön’s (1983) terminology, “reflection-in-action.” Schön explains his reflection-in-action as the art that practitioners use to deal with situations of uncertainty or uniqueness; when a practitioner’s skillful actions reveal a “knowing more than we can say” (p. 51). Sometimes the participants’ actions seemed completely spontaneous but were likely the result of past experiences, entrenched behaviour, and processed knowledge. Actions resulted from a storehouse of experience. Schön’s reflection-in-action is one way to explain the participants’ references to their intuitive and unconscious responses to situations that did turn out to be considered wise acts. Harold described intuition as “a very useful word for those kinds of insights and maybe decisions or actions which bubble up out of the whole body of one’s experiences.” Vera offered that sometimes you should not think but rather trust your intuition. “Don’t think beforehand, listen to your insides and do the right thing.”
During our life-time, we may be fortunate enough to experience or witness wisdom. If so, it will likely happen in the “ordinary stuff of life.” Because of the social interactive design of this study, I, along with the study’s participants, witnessed a wise act that unfolded between Allen and Harold during our third group discussion session. That wise act, with its intuitive and intentional components, was described in detail in Chapter 6. Harold in our last one-on-one interview explained how his actions in the incident with Allen just seemed to surface, which demonstrated beautifully the intricate role of intuition in wise act enablement.

The wise nominees of this study stated they did not believe they were wise and nominees from other studies have made the same proclamation (Edmondson, 2013, Taylor, 2010). Traditionally, this reluctance to accept the title of being wise has been attributed to wise individuals being humble. Edmondson (2013) explains that even Socrates declined to accept the title of being wise and suggests the reluctance to accept the title of wise may be attributed to the fact that wise individuals often only know part of the social processes with which they are involved; they might not be privy to the effects of their actions. As the researcher and interpreter of this study’s entrusted data, I carefully listened to what the wise nominees of this study reported. They told me they were not wise and, as hard as it was to accept their disclaimers, I listened to them and tried to interpret what might underlie their non-acceptance of the “wise” title. I believe one of the wise acts shared by Deborah, one of this study’s participants, gives credence to Edmondson’s explanation for individuals’ reluctance to accept this tile.
Deborah, a former guidance counsellor, shared her story of being thanked many years later by one of her students for some wise questions she had posed to the student during the student’s time of need. Deborah for many years was unaware of her questions’ effect on her student. In our conversations, Deborah credited her student with wisdom, while the student had credited Deborah with the wisdom. Deborah noted she could have handled that situation with other students in the same way but with a different outcome. I could see that both Deborah and her student were right; both contributed to the resulting wisdom in that particular situation. Deborah posed wise questions, which allowed the student to recognize her own strength and ability to handle her life dilemma; wisdom occurred as a result of their interaction. Deborah’s role in this situation was that of a wise-act-catalyst, while her student was a receptive-witness, open to recognize the potential value of Deborah’s questions. As a result, the student was able to find her own way and manage her life positively going forward; wisdom resulted.

The role of community and witness were present in all of the participants’ chosen wise act stories. Allen took initiative and reported misconduct on the part of his superior, which resulted in recognition by his coworkers of the gravity of the situation and his boss being fired from his job. Harold’s refusal to strap a student was supported by his school’s Vice Principal and recognized in hindsight with praise. Rachael’s words of encouragement inspired a young artist, and the community later recognized that artist’s abilities and elevated her to take on the role of the arts festival manager. Stephen’s creative approach to manage the closing ceremonies for his school was appreciated by the
school community once the ceremonies were successfully conducted. Tessa’s decision to team up and work with other city councillors to find the best location for an entertainment complex was also appreciated in hindsight by the community. Vera’s choice to document and share with other UN delegates what she understood of the Americans’ position was appreciated and acknowledged after the fact. These participants, nominated for this study because of their history of wise action, all chose to share wise act scenarios where they received, at some point in time, affirmations that what they had initiated had a positive impact.

**Wisdom**

No one idea, no one statement, and no one description are responsible for the perspective of wisdom that amalgamates this study’s findings. Forty years of wisdom’s empirical investigation has yet to have led to a universally accepted definition of wisdom (Baltes & Smith, 2008; Birren & Fisher, 1990; Bluck & Glück, 2005). It would have been unrealistic to expect this group of wise nominees to achieve what the academic community has not. However, they were tasked with describing wisdom, and they did provide wonderful descriptions of their understandings of wisdom, as documented in Chapters 4 and 7. These descriptions were captured not only through the interview process and our ongoing group discussions but also through group activities. One activity involved the participants selecting pictures that represented wisdom to them. They used these pictures to share their understandings of wisdom with the group. Tessa’s chosen picture spoke to her of how wisdom represents courage in dealing with life’s hardships.
Vera, Tessa, Deborah, and Anne chose pictures that demonstrated the relationship of wisdom to our human connections across generations and cultures. Harold’s picture spoke to him of wisdom’s multi-dimensions. Stephen chose a picture that reminded him that wisdom was possible with anyone. Other elements they linked to wisdom addressed the art of listening, creativity, spirituality, and the ability to make unusual integrations.

A second activity that asked the participants, during our fifth group discussion session, to draw their impressions of the development of wisdom added to the accumulation of their ideas of wisdom. Harold’s diagram addressed the personal experiential learning aspects of wisdom. Rachael’s and Tessa’s diagrams spoke to personal wisdom growing over time through experiences with others. Deborah’s picture depicted wisdom in practice. She explained that either the central figure in her diagram or the other people connected could be responsible for wisdom’s presence. Vera’s diagrams depicted wisdom resulting from a combination of many people’s ideas, while Anne’s three-levelled diagram spoke to wisdom’s impact.

Themes of authenticity, wholeness, connections with humans and our environment, the value of and learning from shared experiences, and the link between wisdom and spirituality emerged across all of the data with respect to wisdom. The interpretive process to gather the meanings held by these wise nominees’ understandings of wisdom was both challenging and exhilarating. So many disparate concepts needed to be synthesized to present this study’s final perspective of wisdom.
The participants’ reports of their personal wise acts did not indicate there were many wisdoms. Rather in the wise acts the participants chose to share, they described their actions as pertinent and unique to each situation. The resulting wisdom was recognized as specific to each situation. Their wise act stories of interaction and reaction with others implied there were many forms of wisdom recognized by the community. Wisdom can take on many forms but that does not mean there are many wisdoms. Kunzmann and Stange (2007) in their summary of implicit theory understandings of wisdom say, “in laypeople’s conceptions, wisdom represents human excellence” (p. 307). This study supports this statement and extends it to add that wisdom represents human excellence in its many forms.

**Relationship of Wise Acts and Wisdom**

Data collected with respect to the relationship between wise acts and wisdom presented the biggest challenge. It was not too difficult to see from the participants’ explanations that wise practices positioned these wise nominees to act wisely. It was their relationship descriptions of wise acts and wisdom that were extremely varied and complex. I chose to include those varied perspectives in Chapter 7. These descriptions included, among other things, seeing personal wisdom as a developmental process, as did both Vera and Harold. Deborah’s view was different. She addressed the idea of wisdom developing over time but with others being integral to the process. She saw their recognition and feedback as significant. Rachael’s words summarized what she heard the
other participants discussing and provided the kernel of the idea about wisdom’s emergence when she described wisdom as surfacing.

**Wisdom’s Social Nature**

*Human beings are social creatures. We are social not just in the trivial sense that we like company, and not just in the obvious sense that we each depend on others. We are social in a more elemental way: simply to exist as a normal human being requires interaction with other people.*

Atul Gawande

On behalf of this study’s participants and following a review of the wisdom literature, I argue that wisdom has the potential to emerge out of unique human interactions in particular contexts. This study concludes that wisdom is constructed among people; interaction and reaction are integral to wisdom’s co-creation. This understanding moves away from the person-centered theory of wisdom that views wisdom as an internal manifestation. Rather wisdom is seen as an external manifestation. This perspective expands upon the work of Edmondson (2005, 2012, 2013), Oser, Schenker, and Spychiger (1999), Yang (2008a, 2008b), and the many other researchers and philosophers who have acknowledged wisdom’s social nature. One of this study’s participants, Tessa said, “Wisdom does arrive from community and in community. It really doesn’t happen on its own.” Deborah offered that “wisdom evolves from shared experiences.”

To help clarify this perspective of wisdom, a diagram of a situated wise act is presented in Figure 8. This graphic representation of a wise act shows the emergence of wisdom resulting from an everyday life occurrence and a process of interaction between
two or more individuals. One of those individual’s role is that of the wise-act-catalyst, the action initiator, and there are one or more receptive-witnesses to the initiated act (the act might involve advice, a suggestion, guiding questions, a decision, a judgment, etc.). The wisdom that emerges may be recognized immediately or only in hindsight as reported by this study’s participants.

**Figure 8: Diagram of a Situated Wise Act**

![Diagram of a Situated Wise Act]

For the purposes of this study a definition of a wise act is presented. A *wise act is a unique interaction between a wise-act-catalyst and one or more receptive witnesses that occurs within a specific context or situation and results in the emergence of wisdom.* Figure 8 describes such a unique interaction in a particular context between two
individuals, a wise-act-catalyst and a receptive witness, that results in the emergence of wisdom. The community-at-large would traditionally credit the wise-act-catalyst, who would likely be labelled a wise person, with the resulting wisdom. However, the findings of this study suggest, as is shown in Figure 8, that it is the interaction between these two individuals, the wise-act-catalyst and the receptive witness, that results in wisdom’s emergence. Both individuals are responsible for wisdom in this scenario. The feedback shown in this diagram could come from others in the community or from each individual’s personal reflections on this occurrence. Received feedback, either from the community-at-large or through personal reflections, would likely impact the individual’s personal development and capacity for further wise action.

I use the renowned Biblical story of Solomon’s wise judgment to explain this study’s view of wisdom. The story of King Solomon’s wise judgement that resolved the conflict between two women claiming to be the mother of the same child has been referenced frequently in the wisdom literature. Oser, Schenker, and Spychiger (1999) say that actions typically follow an expected logic. These authors suggest the King Solomon act was different. “This wise act does not have the logic of ordinary problem-solving on its side, rather it reflects something beyond ordinary logic” (p. 157). Solomon, in this study’s view of wisdom, would be the wise-act-catalyst. The real mother, who chose to forgo her right to mother her child in lieu of the alternative, the child being severed, would be the receptive-witness. Solomon’s judgment was both intuitive and creative.
However, there could have been a very different outcome to this story if the mother, the receptive-witness, had chosen otherwise.

Solomon was the catalyst that set the stage for the resulting wisdom, but the mother’s reaction to his judgment completed the act. The mother was given the opportunity to choose wisely and she did, resulting in wisdom. The child was saved, the biological mother won custody of her child, and the community recognized the wisdom in Solomon’s judgment. Solomon’s judgment was deemed to be wise, and he garnered credit for his judgment from the community-at-large. Edmondson (2013) suggests that wisdom “resides not in the superiority of wise individuals but in what happens between them and others, as well as in what they bring others to do” (p. 200). In his judgment, Solomon indeed was the catalyst for wisdom, but it was the interaction between Solomon and the two women, where one of them was a receptive witness and ready to make a wise choice, which completed the act. The outcome of the interaction between Solomon and the mother resulted in wisdom prevailing.

In general, if one individual brings an exceptional perspective to a situation and acts as a catalyst by setting in motion an exceptional way to deal with that particular situation, wisdom may emerge. There must, however, be a receptive-witness or witnesses to follow through on the initiated wise act for the act to be executed and/or recognized as wise.
The Wise-Act-Catalyst

Human beings are complex living organisms. We are social by nature; our social systems impact our thinking, learning, and cultural understandings of life. Human behaviour is dependent on multiple variables. Given a particular context, life situation, and the people involved in that situation, a human being may choose to behave or interact in a certain way. On another day, in a similar situation but with different individuals, that same human being may deal with that particular situation quite differently. One action does not determine a lifetime of similar actions. It would be shortsighted to label or judge a human being based on a single action. For example, if a seven-year-old boy could not resist temptation and stole his best friend’s fancy pen, it would be amiss to label this child a thief for the rest of his life based on this one digression. Similarly, we should not presuppose a person to be wise because she or he acted wisely in one particular situation.

Stephen, in his role as Vice-Principal, dealt with his student’s actions without labelling them. He separated the deed from the doer. This is a perspective needed for the understanding of wisdom. The individual is not wise. Only the individual’s actions may or may not be wise. This perspective would account for the way that some very famous acknowledged wise exemplars do not always demonstrate excellent behaviour in all domains of their lives. A societal tendency, however, is to apply labels to individuals. It is likely that, if an individual continues to demonstrate wise behaviour on multiple occasions, he or she is likely to be labelled as wise. It is very unlikely, however, that an individual could possibly act wisely continuously and in all domains of their life.
Everyone has, however, the ability to perform wise acts and, through that process, further develop the capacity for future wise action.

A wise-act-catalyst may be considered a wise person by the community once he or she builds a reputation for initiating multiple wise acts. In some cases, that person may have such a reputation for wise action that an expectation of wisdom may be developed by the community and that individual may be continuously sought out for advice. The community may begin to anticipate future wise actions and behaviours from that individual and label him or her as wise.

A definition of the role of a wise-act-catalyst is presented. A wise-act-catalyst applies his or her knowledge, beliefs, common sense, intuition, and values to deal effectively, inclusively, and artfully with a life situation so as to initiate benefit for others, oneself, and/or the environment. Everyone may at certain times and in certain situations rise to the occasion and initiate a wise act.

**The Receptive-Witness**

The wisdom literature has focused mainly on the wise person, or as described in this study, the wise-act-catalyst. No doubt the wise-act-catalyst is instrumental in the creation of wisdom but this role, from the current study’s perspective, is only one part of the interaction that may result in the co-creation of wisdom. Throughout the literature, there are references to the social aspects of wisdom. However, the social nature of the phenomenon has been, for the most part, left unexamined. The role of the receptive-witness(es) has not been empirically explored in the literature, but Edmondson (2013)
offers an interpretation of an age-old story that may help explain the role of the receptive-witness. Edmondson explains that this story tells of the Oracle of Delphi’s instructions to offer a three-footed trophy to someone of wisdom. All the Sages approached in the story refused the trophy, declaring themselves not to be wise. Edmondson offers:

[The story] might be read to indicate that wisdom, at any rate among humans, is not something which can properly be attributed to a single individual, or not in its entirety. Here too, the suggestion may be that human wisdom takes place in the interpersonal space between a number of people rather than in what one or other of them does. (p. 202)

This study’s participants have indicated the witness is an active participant in the co-creation of wisdom. The role of the witness may include (a) follow-through with an initiated act, and (b) provision of feedback that can potentially impact the catalyst’s and the community’s future learning. Wisdom is enabled through the witness’ receptivity to the initiated act. The witness(es) must be open to receive and recognize the value in what the wise-act-catalyst has to offer if the initiated act is to be executed and recognized. Wise acts therefore can be considered a communal affair. Anne made the point that “for the impact of wisdom to be felt, there has to be that human connection to set up that receptivity to it.”

Receptive witnesses may well be on their way to becoming wise-act-catalysts themselves, especially if they reflect on their experiences, learn from them, and build their personal capacity for wise action through ongoing practices designed to build a healthy mind, body, and soul. Edmondson (2013) says, “it may be that recognizing the
wisdom of wise people is in part at least an achievement of witnesses…which may also require a degree of discernment on their own parts” (p. 201).

This study has brought to light the important role of the witness and offers that wisdom, when it emerges, is as a result of unique human interactions in particular contexts. Wisdom is constructed among people.

**Research Implications and Recommendations**

Staudinger and Glück (2011) in their list of areas for future research suggest “the further exploration of wisdom beyond the person” (p. 236). The data collected for this study, which began as an exploration of person-centered wise acts and practices, demonstrate that wisdom does indeed extend beyond the person. In fact, what emerged from this study’s data is evidence that wisdom is situated and a form of excellence in human behaviour that emerges from a unique interaction between or among individuals. Wisdom is constructed between or among people; it does not reside within a person. This study’s perspective of wisdom extends the theory put forward by Oser, Schenker, and Spychiger (1999) that suggests that wisdom is situated and, in their words, “is in the act itself” (p. 156). Edmondson’s (2013) theory that wisdom resides in processes that take place “not just between individuals but often in conjunction with others” (p. 205) is also supported by this study’s findings. I invite further research explorations of wisdom’s social nature.
Recommendations for Further Study

This study was not originally designed to examine the social nature of wisdom. Rather, the social and interactive nature of wisdom emerged from the collected data, which aimed to explore wise acts and wise practices and how these relate to wisdom. I would recommend, based on this study’s findings, that the social nature of wisdom be explicitly investigated. For example, examining the significance and weight of the roles of each of the players involved in a wise act or an incident of wisdom would shed new light on the phenomenon.

The homogeneous nature of this study’s participants has previously been discussed in this dissertation and, as we have seen, the samples of other studies that have collected qualitative data from nominated wise individuals have appeared similarly homogeneous (Krafcik, 2011; Lyster, 1996; Montgomery, Barber, & Mckee, 2002; Taylor, 2010). I would suggest that part of the reason for the similarity in the samples is that either the nominees or nominators were selected for their wisdom-facilitative experiences as advised by Baltes and Staudinger (1993), meaning the individuals with wisdom-facilitative experiences had skills in teaching, leadership, counselling, or managing civic responsibilities. Nominators tend to select nominees similar to themselves but older. Starting with nominators from more diverse backgrounds and selecting nominees with varying life histories would provide greater insight into the phenomenon. The nominees of this study were well educated, middle class white individuals with strong family support systems. Studying the interactions of individuals
from various socio-economic backgrounds would prove informative, especially when examining the social nature of wisdom.

Oser, Schenker, and Spychiger (1999) theorized that wisdom is a form of extraordinary action and they defined seven criteria to delineate the concept of wisdom: “a) the illogic of the situation itself, b) unobtrusiveness, c) selflessness, d) surprise, e) contradiction, f) an existential willingness to take on risks for something, and g) public awareness of suffering” (pp. 160–161). Designing a study to assess how many of these seven criteria must be present for an act to be declared wise would contribute to our definition and understandings of wise acts.

A question arose from this study’s participants during our discussions. They wondered if the times they grew up in had an influence on their capacity for wisdom. Staudinger (2013) suggests that some “historical periods are more conducive to the development of wisdom” (p. 11). The majority of this group of participants grew up during WWII, and they reported having a great deal of freedom offered to them. It would be helpful to know whether that freedom resulted from the times they lived in, the particular levels of trust offered to them by their parents, or both. In fact an examination of the role of the family in the development of an individual’s capacity to initiate wise acts would be extremely beneficial and serve to better understand the social implications of wisdom. This group discussed the power of the family narrative. Exploring the influence of the family narrative with respect to personal development that may lead to the initiation or recognition of wisdom, should prove provocative.
Our world is shrinking. Globalization, access to transport, and technology advancements are informing us, bringing us closer together, and making transparent our world-views. Clayton and Birren (1980) called for an examination of the universal concepts of wisdom that may transcend cultural values and standards. The reflective wise practices as reported by this study’s Western nominees embraced elements of Eastern traditions. Perhaps the times are right to further study the life management practices of exemplars across cultures. Their practices may provide the key to what may universally inspire wisdom.

All of the participants in this study, as well as the participants in my earlier research on wisdom (see Taylor, 2010), indicated that their spirituality was an important element in their lives. It could prove significant to explore the link between individuals’ spiritual beliefs and practices and their ability to initiate wise acts.

Lastly, I would like to recommend the use of the methodological approach I employed during this phenomenological inquiry. Using group discussions to explore the complexity of the wisdom phenomenon proved extremely useful. The participants enjoyed the process but more importantly the spaced discussion sessions provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and bring a clearer understanding of their thoughts back to the discussion table. I am convinced this group discussion approach would work well for research that requires an in-depth and reflective examination of the human condition.
Implications for Everyday Life

*No man was ever wise by chance.*  
*Lucius Annaeus Seneca*

Trowbridge and Ferrari (2011) offer that “although becoming wise may be beyond human limits, we can certainly become wiser” (p. 93). This study’s wise nominees may hold the key to how we might improve our capacity for wise action. Following the example of this study’s wise exemplars could lead to improved reactions to life situations. Remaining open and non-judgmental, spending some alone and quiet time regularly, and working to better know one’s self may have positive effects on one’s life. The reported practices of these wise exemplars had the effect of removing them from the everyday bustle of life to quiet down and center themselves. They engaged in habitual practices to maintain sound minds, bodies, and souls. They have learned that keeping themselves centered and balanced allows them to be open and to deal with life situations optimally.

I would recommend if we aim to be the best persons we can be, respectfully recognize we are but one small part of the greater whole, and we consider others in our daily lives, wise actions will likely follow. By focusing on our own actions and doing what we know to the best of our abilities, we might be fortunate enough to experience wisdom through our interactions with others. The wise exemplars of this study do just that. They spend their energy on what they can control and trust in their developing intuition to guide them.
Leaving This Study

So many people gave me something or were something to me without knowing it....I always think that we all live, spiritually, by what others have given us in the significant hours of our life. These significant hours do not announce themselves as coming but arrive unexpected.

Albert Schweitzer

My original objective for conducting this research was to discover ways to help people, myself included, to realize, develop, and optimize our personal wisdom. When I started on this journey of learning, I saw wisdom as a form of human expertise that could possibly be acquired through a process of effort and learning. My thinking about wisdom has gone through a paradigm shift. I no longer see wisdom as residing within a person. I now see that wisdom emerges through human interaction, and I have learned that one’s energy should be spent not only on a host of regular reflective, physical, and connecting-with-others practices but also on developing empathy for others, and striving to truly know one’s self.

This study of wise exemplars’ actions informs our understanding of practical wisdom and aligns with some of the classic attributes associated with practical wisdom. Osbeck and Robinson (2005) articulate some of the attributes Aristotle spoke of concerning phronesis, practical wisdom: “experience in the world of human affairs...common sense...ingrained habits conducive to the good life...the ability to reflect deliberately and carefully about choices in relation to knowledge of human nature” (p. 70). What this study’s participants reported about their own actions and their understandings of wisdom are consistent with Aristotle’s decrees. These wise-act-
catalysts, these wise nominees, these exemplars live as wisdom practitioners initiating through their actions and interactions with others, the emergence of wisdom, excellence in human behaviour.

I reluctantly leave this study. I feel my spiritual self has been expanded through this process and my awareness of the importance of our human connections has been heightened. I feel I have barely scratched the surface of knowing about the complex phenomenon of wisdom. I leave its future exploration in the hands of other capable researchers. The voices of this study’s exemplars have managed to change my perspective of wisdom. Hopefully, their wise act examples, lived experiences, and understandings of wisdom will inform your concepts of this complex phenomenon.

**Last Words To The Wise Nominees**

*Wise decisions are related to prior blunders.*

Allen

*A wise action is something that has a positive effect on people within a particular community and may change for the better how that community acts in the future.*

Anne

*Wisdom is impossible without seeing that the outside self and inside self are consistent.*

Deborah

*The ability to be wise is innate; every human being has it.*

Harold

*Wisdom isn’t always a thought-out process. It’s a much more spontaneous experience.*

Rachael

*If an individual chooses to be a selfish person; I question their ability to be wise if the centre of their focus is themselves.*

Stephen
Equality is what should be a goal for everyone.

Tessa

Wisdom sometimes comes from quietness; there’s great value in being quiet.

Vera
References


Lorenz, E. (1972). Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas? Presentation at the 139th meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, DC.


221


Appendix A

Recruitment Poster

Do you know a wise person?

“Wisdom in Action” is a research study that will be conducted this fall in Kingston. If you know a wise individual who has a history of performing wise acts and you think she or he might be willing to participate in this study, please contact wisenominees@gmail.com or (613) 533-6721 to make a nomination or for more information about the study.

Your nominee should be an adult person 30+ years old whom you have known for more than 5 years and who has performed at least 3 wise acts that you can describe.

This research is being conducted by Connie Taylor, a PhD student at the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University, under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler, and has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen’s policies.
Appendix B

Nominator Form

Study Description:
This research is being conducted by Connie Taylor, a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler. This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen’s policies.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the robust construct of wisdom. In particular this study will explore with individuals, considered and nominated by others to be wise and to have performed wise acts, their experiences and their understandings of wisdom, wise practice, and the performance of wise acts.

Instructions:
You must obtain verbal consent from your nominee to allow their nomination and to have the researcher, Connie Taylor, contact them directly about their possible participation in the study “Wisdom In Action: A Phenomenological Study Of Wise Acts, Wise Practice, And Their Contribution To The Development Of Wisdom.”

Please complete this questionnaire giving details regarding your nomination for this study and return your completed questionnaire to wisenominees@gmail.com. The information you provide will be used only to nominate a potential study participant. The information you provide will not be used in the study. Only I, the researcher Connie Taylor, will have access to the information you provide and I will keep your information confidential.

To protect the confidentiality of the study’s nominees:
- you will not be informed if your nominee agrees to participate in this study or is selected as a study participant; and
- you are asked not to share information about your nomination with others.

Has your wise nominee given permission to be contacted directly concerning this study?
Yes ________  No ________

Do you agree to keep information about your nomination confidential?
Yes ________  No ________

Name of individual you nominate as having performed wise acts: ___________________

Telephone of nominee: ______________________________________________________

E-mail of nominee: ______________________________________________________

228
How do you know the nominee? _____________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
For how long have you known the nominee? _________________________________
Provide descriptions of 3 examples when this individual performed a wise act: ______
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
[insert name of nominator]                                                   Date: ____________

Thank you for making this nomination.
Connie Taylor, PhD Student
Queen’s University, Faculty of Education
contactconnietaylor@gmail.com
(613) 533-6271
Appendix C

Letter of Information for Wise Nominee

Dear Prospective Participant:

This research is being conducted by Connie Taylor a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler. This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen’s policies.

What is this study about? The purpose of this study is to better understand the robust construct of wisdom. In particular this study will explore with individuals, considered and nominated by others to be wise and to have performed wise acts, their experiences and their understandings of wisdom, wise practice, and the performance of wise acts.

What does this study involve? This study will involve your participation in two one-on-one interviews with the researcher that will take approximately 60-90 minutes each. The first interview is designed to obtain information about your life history and the second interview will provide you an opportunity to reflect on your wisdom experiences and to add anything that you didn’t have a chance to discuss during the group discussions. You will also participate in six scheduled group meetings with five to nine other participants that will each last 2-2.5 hours. The group meetings are designed to inspire group discussions and solicit information about wisdom, wise practice, wise acts and the relationship among these. Various materials related to wisdom and activities will be introduced to evoke discussions about issues around the enablement, personal efforts, and impact of your experiences with the expression of wisdom. As well, you will be asked to prepare some written pieces in preparation for group meetings that are estimated to take 2-4 hours of your time. These writing activities are not mandatory. They will only be suggestions to inspire your reflections about wisdom and wise acts to prepare you for the group discussions. A combined total of 16-22 hours of interviews, group meetings, and writing time over the six month period August 2013 - January 2014 would be required to participate in this research.

One interview will be conducted at the beginning of the study and the second interview will take place after the last group meeting. The interviews and group meetings will take place at times and locations that are scheduled by you in conjunction with the researcher and the other research participants, and will proceed only with your approval of the agreed times and locations. All interviews and group meetings will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. There are no known physical, psychological, economic, or social risks associated with your study participation.

Is my participation voluntary? Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time with no effect or consequences to you. You may request the removal of all or part of your data from the research. You should not feel obliged to answer any questions or participate in any discussion you find objectionable or that make you uncomfortable. You may
withdraw from the research by indicating in person at any one of the interviews or any of the group discussion sessions or you can contact the researcher Connie Taylor (contactconnietaylor@gmail.com; 613-533-6721) or her supervisor Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler (rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca; 613-533-6000 ext. 77273) to indicate your desire to withdraw.

What will happen to my responses? Your responses to interview questions and information collected during the group meetings will be kept confidential to the extent possible. Only the researcher, her dissertation committee, and a document transcriber will have access to the data. The data and results of the study may be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences. The publications or presentations will be of general findings only and will not identify the study participants. A pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect your identity. The members of the dissertation committee will have access to the data only after the researcher has assigned pseudonyms to the collected data. Should you decide to participate, it will be important that you not divulge the identity of the other group participants or the substance of the group discussions when the session is completed in order to maintain confidentiality to the extent possible. Because multiple persons will participate in the group discussions, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. However, every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality to the extent possible including requiring your consent along with all group members to keep the identity and information about other participants confidential and not share with others.

If the data is made available to other faculty or researchers for secondary analysis it will contain no identifying information.

In accordance with Queen’s Faculty of Education policy, the data for this study will be retained for a minimum of five years after which time it will be destroyed. Should you be interested, you are entitled to a copy of the findings.

Will I be compensated for my participation? You will not receive any monetary compensation for your time. Snacks and non-alcoholic beverages will be provided during group meetings.

What if I have concerns? Any questions about study participation may be directed to the researcher, Connie Taylor, at contactconnietaylor@gmail.com or 613-533-6721, or her supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler at rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 77273. Any ethical concerns about the study may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081.

What do I do if I am interested in participating in this study? If you are interested in participating in this study please contact Connie Taylor, the researcher, at contactconnietaylor@gmail.com or 613-533-6721 who will answer any questions you may have about the study. If you agree to participate in this study, please keep this letter for your files and sign the two accompanying consent forms. Retain one of the consent forms for your records and return the other to the researcher at the first individual interview that will be mutually arranged between you and Connie Taylor.

Your participation in this study will be greatly appreciated. Sincerely,
Connie Taylor, PhD Student
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University

Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler, Supervisor
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
Appendix D

Consent Form for Wise Nominee

Name (please print clearly): ________________________________________

1. I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

2. I understand that I will be participating in the study called “Wisdom In Action: A Phenomenological Study Of Wise Acts, Wise Practice, And Their Contribution To The Development Of Wisdom”. I understand that I will be participating in two one-on-one interviews with the researcher that will take approximately 60-90 minutes each. The first interview is designed to obtain information about my life history and the second interview will provide me an opportunity to reflect on my wisdom experiences and to add anything that I didn’t have a chance to discuss during the group discussions. I will also participate in six scheduled group meetings with five to nine other participants that will each last 2-2.5 hours. The group meetings are designed to inspire group discussions and solicit information about wisdom, wise practice, wise acts and the relationship among these. Various materials related to wisdom and activities will be introduced to evoke discussions about issues around the enablement, personal efforts, and impact of my experiences with the expression of wisdom. As well, I will be asked to prepare some written pieces in preparation for group meetings that are estimated to take 2-4 hours of my time. These writing activities are not mandatory. They will only be suggestions to inspire my reflections about wisdom and wise acts to prepare me for the group discussions. A combined total of 16-22 hours of interviews, group meetings, and writing time over the six month period August 2013 – January 2014 are required for me to participate in this research. One interview will be conducted at the beginning of the study and the second interview will take place after the last group meeting. The interviews and group meetings will take place at times and locations that are scheduled by me in conjunction with the researcher and the other research participants, and will proceed only with my approval of the agreed times and locations. All interviews and group meetings will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some additional time may be required for me to write some reflective pieces in preparation for or resulting from group meeting discussions. I may be asked to share these reflections with the other group members.

3. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time with no effect to me. If I do withdraw, I understand that I may request removal of all or part of my data from the study. I also understand that I am not obliged to answer any questions or participate in any discussion I find objectionable or that makes me feel uncomfortable. I can withdraw from the research by indicating in person at any one of the interviews or any of the group discussion sessions or I can contact the researcher Connie Taylor (contactconnietaylor@gmail.com; 613-533-6721) or her supervisor Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler (rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca; 613-533-6000 ext. 77273) to indicate my desire to withdraw.
4. I understand that every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality to the extent possible. Only the researcher, her research committee, and the document transcriber will have access to this data. I understand that I will not divulge the identity of the other participants or the substance of the discussions that take place during the group meetings when the study is completed in order to maintain confidentiality to the extent possible. Because multiple persons will participate in the group discussions, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. However, every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality to the extent possible including requiring my consent along with all group members to keep the identity and information about other participants confidential and not share with others. I acknowledge the data may be published in professional journals or presented at scientific conferences, but any such presentations will be of general findings and will maintain individual confidentiality to the extent possible. Should I be interested, I am entitled to a copy of the findings.

5. I am aware that if I have any questions about my participation in this study, I may direct my questions to the researcher, Connie Taylor at contactconnieltaylor@gmail.com or 613-533-6721; or her supervisor, Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler at rebecca.luce.kapler@queensu.ca or 613-533-6000 ext. 77273. Any ethical concerns I have about the study can be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613-533-6081 at Queen’s University.

I have read the above statements and freely consent to my participation in this research:

Signature: ________________________________ Date: _______________________

I would like to request a copy of the results of this study be sent to the following email or postal address: __________________________________________________________

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Connie Taylor at the first personal interview session. Retain the second copy for your records.
Appendix E
Summary Research Study (Taylor, 2010)

A conceptual framework emerged from the qualitative research study titled, Wisdom Acquisition Revealed: How Wise Individuals Report Learning Life Lessons conducted by Connie Taylor. The framework is composed of a model that describes the process of knowledge acquisition and wisdom application, and the life management practices of wise individuals.

Experiential Wisdom Acquisition Model

This model draws on multiple philosophies and learning theories. It was developed in advance of the study and was corroborated and adjusted with the study’s findings. Dewey’s (1933, 1938) philosophy of Experience, Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning theories, Schön’s (1983) theory on reflection, and Ardelt’s (2005a) research findings on reflection and coping strategies all inform this four-step, interactive, and iterative model.

Four step model:
1. Individual reacts to a life experience and the outcomes are realized;
2. Experiential lesson ensues from the reflection on the reaction and outcomes of Step One;
3. Integration of the experiential lesson learned in Step Two with existing knowledge and past experiences results in a generalized life lesson;
4. Validation of the life lesson with external data sources combined with critical reflection allows for adjustments to the knowledge base as the life lesson is corroborated or reframed.

Life Management Practices of Wise Individuals

Four common themes emerged that the practices moderating the life lesson learning process for this group of wise nominees: (a) know yourself; (b) be fully engaged in life; (c) make sense of your experiences; and (d) believe in universal support.

The first three themes focus on self-reliance. The fourth theme emerged as a complement, an anchor for the study participants. All of the nominators and wise nominees saw themselves as part of a bigger picture, part of the whole, that the world did not revolve around them and that they were humbly and consciously dealing with life as fully as possible. The fourth theme addresses the nominees’ connectedness to their world.
Appendix F
Holliday and Chandler’s Factor Structure of Wisdom

1. Exceptional understanding
   Uses common sense
   Has learned from experience
   Sees things within a larger context
   Observant/perceptive
   Understands him- or herself
   Sees the essence of situations
   Intuitive
   Philosophical
   Empathic
   Not necessarily formally educated
   Open-minded
   Flexible
   Understands people
   Thinks for him- or herself

2. Judgement and communication skills
   Aware
   Is a source of good advice
   Comprehending
   Understands life
   Worth listening to
   Considers all options in a situation
   Reflective
   Thinks carefully before deciding
   Farsighted/farseeing
   Weighs the consequences of actions
   Sees and considers all points of view
   Uncondescending
   Conservative
   Astute
   Knows when to give/not give advice

3. General competencies
   Curious
   Thoughtful/thinks a great deal
   Understands/evaluates information
   Well-read
   Intelligent
   Articulate
   Alert
   Respected
Self-actualized
An advisor or mentor
Complex
Older
Able to predict how things will turn out
Educated
Successful
Methodical
Experienced
Knowledgeable

4. **Interpersonal Skills**
Fair
Sensitive
Reliable
A good listener
Even-tempered
Poised
Likeable
Relaxed
Modest/humble
Sociable
Moral
Patient
Unselfish
Kind
Spiritual
Happy
Mature
Compassionate

5. **Social Unobtrusiveness**
Discreet
Non-judgmental
Non-impulsive
Quiet
Plans carefully

Table IX: Variables defining the five factors in the principal components analysis. (p. 61) from:

Appendix G

Ethics Letter of Study Clearance

July 16, 2013

Ms. Connie Taylor, Ph.D. Candidate
Faculty of Education
Dunsmuir McArthur Hall
Queen's University
511 Union Street
Kingston, ON K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: CEDUC-002-12; Research #: 6040246

Dear Ms. Taylor:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "CEDUC-002-13 Wisdom in Action: A Phenomenological Study of Wise Acts, Wise Practice, and Their Contribution to the Development of Wisdom" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCGS) and Queen's ethical policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit IERB, of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one-year period (access this form at https://services.queens/research/research and click Items - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example, you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementation of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://services.queens/research/research and click Items - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or givmg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

C. Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler, Faculty Supervisor
Dr. Dean Klinger, Chair, Unit REB
Eric Wieland, co Graduate Studies and Bureau of Research

237
Appendix H

First Interview Guide and Sample Questions

Interview Guide

Interviews were semi-structured with the intention of exploring with the wise nominees their personal experiences with and understanding of wisdom, wise acts, and wise practice. The following sample questions allowed the wise nominees to expand upon their reflections about these subjects. The researcher when warranted introduced one or more questions that emerged from responses given by the wise nominees. These interviews were intended to shape the discussions to be conducted during the group meetings.

Introductory Statement

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As you know, my name is Connie Taylor. I am a PhD student with Queen’s Faculty of Education, and I am conducting this research under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler. I collected your Consent Form at the beginning of this session and I am wondering before we get started with this interview, if you have any questions for me that arose from either the Letter of Information or the Consent Form? I am very happy that you have consented to share your personal opinions and experiences on the topic of wisdom, wise acts, and wise practice. You can expect this interview to last between 60 and 90 minutes. If you need a break at any time, please let me know. I will be recording the interview and the recording will be transcribed. I will not use your name in any of my notes or in any publication that may result from this study. I am interested in your opinions. If you feel uncomfortable replying to any question, just say so and I will move on to the next question. If you want to completely terminate the interview for any reason you have every right to do so at any point in time without any explanation. I am looking forward to moving ahead with our discussion and learning about your personal experiences with wisdom, wise acts, and wise practice. I am interested in whatever you have to tell me.

Sample Questions

• Can you tell me a little about yourself? (age, marital status, number of children, your work/career, significant/defining life events, etc.)
• I asked you in advance of our meeting to think about and to make some notes about a few wise acts you may have performed over your life time (or at least some acts that others may have considered as wise). Describe one or two of these wise acts.
• What do you think might contribute to your or others’ ability to perform wise acts?
• To what extent do you think carefully before you take action in most situations?
  - What are the types of things you might generally take into consideration before taking action?
  - Please give me an example.
• How often do you take the time to think through what the impact of your actions might be?
  - Please give me an example.
• To what extent do you consider others when you make decisions to take action?
- Please give me an example.
- What about participating in this study interests you?
  - What do you hope to learn about wisdom?
  - What about wisdom would you like to be discussed during our future group meetings?

Thank you for this interview.

I look forward to seeing you at our first group meeting. I am going to ask if you could take the time to prepare something in advance of our first group discussion. In your Letter of Information and on your Consent Form you were informed that some writing assignments would be required for this study. Those writing assignments are designed to make you reflect on your experiences and think about wisdom in general. I am going to ask you to take the time to write in detail about one of the wise incidents we discussed during this interview. If you could write about what led up to that incident, what you took into consideration before taking action, and what were the immediate and long-term consequences of your actions, that would be great. If you feel comfortable at the end of our group discussion you can turn in your writing but that is totally up to you. The intention of this writing assignment is to help you reflect on an incident you feel comfortable sharing with the group and to be prepared for that discussion.

See you on [date of first meeting]. Thanks again!
Appendix I

Second Interview Guide and Sample Questions

Interview Guide
Interviews were semi-structured with the intention of exploring with the wise nominees their personal opinions and understanding of wisdom, wise acts, and wise practice now that the group meetings had terminated. The following sample questions allowed the wise nominees to expand upon their reflections on these subjects. The researcher introduced one or more questions that emerged from responses given by the wise nominees during the interviews and the group meetings.

Introductory Statement
Thank you for your participation in this study to date and agreeing to participate in this final interview. I am very happy that you have consented to share your personal opinions and experiences on the topic of wisdom, wise acts, and wise practice. For this interview which should take between 60 and 90 minutes, I am interested in exploring with you if any of your opinions have changed since the beginning of this study, where your opinions might differ from the group discussions and group consensus, and what you got out of your participation in the group meetings. Once again, I will remind you that this interview is being recorded. You have the right not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable and you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without explanation.

Sample Questions
- What did you particularly enjoy about participating in the group meetings?
- Have any of your opinions on the subjects of wisdom, wise acts, and wise practice changed since the beginning of this study?
  - If so, can you describe those changed opinions?
- Do you think there were any barriers in this study or in the group meetings that prevented you from freely expressing your opinions?
  - If so, what were they and how could they be prevented if another similar study were to be conducted?
- If another study of this kind were to be conducted, what would you recommend should be explored?
- Please express any last thoughts you’d like to make on these topics before we terminate our interview.

Thank you for your participation in this study. I have really appreciated the time and commitment you’ve made to furthering our understanding of the complex and robust construct of wisdom.
Appendix J

Themed Group Discussion Meetings

The group meetings were designed to be emergent, refined depending on input from preceding interviews and meetings. For example, the initial interviews with the nominees guided the refinement of the first planned group meeting and so on.

The Introductory Statement for First Group Meeting:
I am very happy that you have consented to share your personal opinions and experiences on the topic of wisdom, wise acts, and wise practice. You can expect this group discussion session to last between 2-2.5 hours. Whenever you need to take a break please let me know, I have some coffee and snacks available for our break. I will be recording this group discussion and the recording will be transcribed. I will not use your name in any of my notes or in any publication that may result from this study.

Your participation in this group discussion is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from this discussion group or study at any time with no effect or consequences to you. You may request the removal of all or part of your data from the research. You should not feel obliged to answer any questions or participate in any discussion you find objectionable or that makes you uncomfortable. You may withdraw from the research by indicating in person at any one of the interviews or any of these group discussion sessions or you can contact me, the researcher Connie Taylor (contactconnietaylor@gmail.com; 613-533-6721) or my supervisor Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler (rebecca.luce-kapler@queensu.ca; 613-533-6000 ext. 77273) to indicate your desire to withdraw.

Remember, I am interested in your opinions. If you feel uncomfortable replying to any question, just say so and I will move on to the next question and please participate in discussions only when you feel comfortable.

As a reminder, you have all signed consent forms that agree you will keep the identity and the substance of the information shared in these group meetings confidential. I cannot completely guarantee your anonymity in this study but if we all honour our agreement to keep information confidential, we will have made every effort to keep the study data confidential to the extent possible.

I am looking forward to moving ahead with our discussion and learning about your personal experiences with wisdom, wise acts, and wise practice. I am interested in whatever you have to tell me.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group Meetings Themed Discussions &amp; Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Group Introductions – November 22, 2013</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Each member introduced themselves and spoke a little of their life history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I shared with the participants some of the things they had told me during their one-on-one interviews such as – why they collectively were interested in participating in the study and what they hoped to have discussed during the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Because the participants had seemed very interested in the research and its purpose, I shared a little about my phenomenological approach to this qualitative research. I offered to e-mail them the study’s four over-arching research questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- To inspire more discussion about what wisdom meant to the participants, an activity was conducted: a very large selection of brightly coloured images, photos and painting reprints were spread out. Participants were asked to select one or two prints that spoke to them about wisdom. The participants enjoyed making their selections. Each participant described the picture(s) they had selected and why it reminded them or spoke to them of wisdom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I told the group we would discuss wise exemplars for the next meeting and asked if there were any wise individuals they wanted to suggest. They suggested: Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Jean Vanier, and Ovide Mercredi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- We did not have time to discuss their life practices as was originally planned. We decided we would discuss their practices at the next group discussion meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I told the group I would send them links to the CBC Part I &amp; II, A Word To The Wise, Ideas with Paul Kennedy series.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Life Practices &amp;The Greats – November 29, 2013</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Homework: At the end of their initial one-on-one interview participants were asked to think and write about their general life practices – religious practices, reflective practices, regular exercise, etc. These would be used for group discussions. The writing assignment could optionally be submitted to the researcher by the study participant. Their choice.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The participants were invited to share some of their life practices which they did. I prompted the discussion with questions pertaining to: time spent with family, spirituality practices, discretion regarding the allocation of time to activities and practices, feelings of connection to the land and people, how their practices have changed over their life span, and if they felt they had balance in their lives. At the end of the session all but one of the participants submitted some kind of writing notes they had prepared in advance of the meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I showed video clips, pictures and stories of a few wise exemplars e.g. Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Jean Vanier, Ovide Mercredi, etc. These stories were used as a means to open a discussion on the definition of wisdom and what does a wise act mean.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|   | - The floor was open for discussion about the wise exemplars. A couple of the participants shared personal stories of their encounters with Ovide Mercredi, Jean Vanier, and the grandson of Ghandi. I asked if wise action began with the storing
of an ideal for later execution – the answer by one participant was that the idea had to come with a “moral screen.” I also asked if these individuals or other wise individuals had inspired them or had they learned special things from any special people they knew in their lives.
- I told the participants I would send them the video clips of the wise exemplars and some info links about the individuals we had spoken of during the session.

### 3 Wise Actions – December 13, 2013

Even though I had decided we wouldn’t speak about exemplars again, because of the death of Nelson Mandela, it seemed appropriate to open the floor to allow them to speak about Mandela.

- What did they learn from him or what about his actions inspired them?

>[Homework: The participants were asked to think or write in some detail about one incident in their life that they conducted and that they believe was a wise act. They were asked to think about the impact of their action on those involved and around them. The writing assignment may optionally be submitted to the researcher by the study participant. Their choice.]

- The participants were asked to do an adaption of “The River of Life” exercise (a sequential pictogram of one’s life events – I provided them with a blank diagram of a river, on one side of the river bank and in sequential order they were asked to draw the significant positive events of their life and the negative life events on the opposite shore of the river. In this case, the participants were asked to position (with an X) the one wise act they thought to share with the group along the length of the river that represented their life from birth to the present. The idea was to position where in their life the wise act occurred. So I asked them to think what else was going on in their life at that time and colour that onto the appropriate bank of the river. For example when were they married, had children, when they worked, etc.
- Then I asked them to take turns sharing the wise action they chose and to try to speak to: what led up to the incident, what they considered before taking action, what were the immediate and long-term consequences of their actions, and what was the impact of their action on others.

### 4 Wise Action Enablers – December 18, 2013

- The wise actions shared from the previous week were briefly reviewed.
- The participants were asked to clarify the time period in their life when their personal wise action occurred.
- The group was then invited to discuss their wise actions:
  - Did the act change them as a person or transform their thinking in anyway?
- Do they think that wisdom precedes a wise act or develops out of the performance of the action?
- Have they thought or reflected about the wise act incident, they chose to share with the group, at other points in their life?
- What role does reflection play? Do they generally take time to reflect on their actions?

- The group was asked to discuss the role that their supportive families had on them and what was the impact of that head start in life.
- The direction of the discussion was shifted to ask the group what enables wise action in general. I asked:
  - What do you think prepares or enables an individual to perform wise acts or to behave wisely?
  - Do you believe the ability to perform wise acts increases over time?
  - Is everyone capable of performing wise acts or behaving wisely?
  - What personal efforts does the group make to enhance their personal abilities to perform wise acts and build their wise practice?


[Homework: A copy of Yang’s article “From Personal Striving to Positive Influence: Exploring Wisdom in Real-Life Contexts” was sent to the group to read prior to the meeting.]

Our discussion began with a reminder of the last questions we had discussed in our last meeting in December.

1. The group had been asked what personal efforts they make to enhance their ability to perform wise acts. They were reminded of some of their answers: be aware; keep yourself centered and balanced; do your best to feel well because you can’t be generous to others if you don’t feel well; be informed; go to the top decision makers to keep yourself informed; take action.

2. They had also been asked if everyone has the ability to be wise. They responded mostly affirmatively; one suggested the ability to be wise was innate, another suggested it was probably not possible to be wise if you were self-centered, and another thought that adversity in life was a great teacher and could help build character. We had a long discussion about how family upbringing plays a big role in shaping and enabling us. Lastly one participant suggested that you need to “just put in your reps. Get busy, do something, make it happen and practice.”

I informed the group that this discussion would center around the concept of wise practice. Then I turned their attention to Yang’s definition of wisdom on the bottom of page 118 and highlighted how she used the word “strives” to live the good life. A discussion about wise practice using Yang’s article began and was prompted by the following questions:

- What do you think of Yang’s concept of wisdom being linked to striving to live a good life?
- Is Yang’s concept of striving the same as making efforts or practicing to
live a good life?
- Do you see yourself as “striving or practicing” to live a good life?
- On page 124 Yang has a great quote about wise persons. I read the quote and then asked the participants to think about this quote in relation to themselves and their nominators and if they could talk about their own efforts at living a good life and if that is what their nominators could see in them.
- At the bottom of page 123 Yang talks about “purposeful actions” – how does the concept of purposeful action relate to wise action and wise practice?
- Yang refers to Frost’s work on page 124 and says “As one road leads to another, each step we take leads us to see …… future possibilities.” We have previously discussed how one action builds on another. How does this concept relate to wise practice?
- I invited them to talk about anything else that stood out for them from Yang’s article.
- I pointed out to them how I thought when Yang reported on page 130 how some wise nominees encountered difficulties earlier in life and wisdom didn’t manifest when solving their own problems “they vow to make a difference by helping others who face similar problems” that made me think of Ovide Mercredi (one of our chosen wise exemplars) who faced racism and put the idea away that he would deal with that later in life. I asked if they have had any similar experiences?

The group was asked if they thought that wisdom existed on a continuum? I showed them a straight line pictogram of an “unwise to wise” continuum and invited them to draw on large pad board paper how they would diagram the development of wisdom. I then asked them to describe their pictograms.

Wrap Up – I asked them to:
1. Think for next time about any of their own thoughts on wisdom we haven’t touched on yet that they would like to bring up;
2. Could they think of any questions about wisdom that they felt should be posed as part of our research study;
3. If they thought anything about wisdom, wise acts, or wise practice were teachable.

Final Thoughts – January 15, 2014
An activity was devised to have a participant select one of six hidden words (written on folded cards). The participant then spoke to the word, passed it along to someone of their choosing, and, while the individual had the card in hand, it acted as a talking stick. The individual would speak then pass it along to someone else until either the selected speaker didn’t want to speak to that word or everyone had already spoken about that word. Then the participant selected another word and so on. The six words discussed in this manner were: choice, connection, consciousness, transformation, spirituality, and
artistry.

[Homework: they were asked to think about the three questions posed at the end of the last session.]

- There was only time to ask about one of those three questions before we wrapped up our session: I asked what about wise acts, wise practice, and wisdom do they think is teachable?
- I thanked them for their participation in these group sessions and I confirmed the meeting times for our last one-on-one interviews with each participant.

Samples of the Types of Materials Potentially Used During the Group Discussion Sessions to Evoke Discussion

Sample of Audio Clips
http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2013/02/27/a-word-to-the-wise-part-1/
http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2013/03/06/a-word-to-the-wise-part-2/

Sample of Video Clips
http://theelders.org/about
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TY2Zm43QQ
http://www.squidoo.com/albert-schweitzer
http://www.biography.com/people/mahatma-gandhi-9305898/videos/mahatma-gandhi-an-unpeaceful-end-2179183345
http://www.jean-vanier.org/en/media/videos/about_intercordia
http://www.jean-vanier.org/en/media/audio/living_in_community

Sample of Art Work
“Fields of Irvington” – watercolour, Louis Comfort Tiffany, 1879
Photograph of petroglyphs at Buffalo Eddy on the Snake River in Idaho
Photograph of a rainbow on a sandy shore of the Saguenay river in Quebec
“A Pair of Shoes” – oil on canvas, Vincent Van Gogh, 1886
“The Starry Night” – oil on canvas, Vincent Van Gogh, 1889
“The Matador” – oil on canvas, Pablo Picasso, 1970
Photograph of “Portiere” (curtain), Designed by Henry Dearle & embroidered by Morris & Co., 1910
“Pic Island, Lake Superior” – oil on beaverboard, Lawren Harris, 1924
Appendix K
Confidentiality Form for Transcriber

In consideration of my work on the research project *Wisdom In Action: A Phenomenological Study of Wise Acts, Wise Practice, And Their Contribution To The Development Of Wisdom* conducted by *Connie Taylor*, the principal investigator, under the direction of *Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler*, the thesis supervisor, at Queen’s University, I ______________ hereby agree that:

In the course of conducting my responsibilities on this research project, I may have access to personal and confidential information and data. I understand that there are legal restrictions on how this information may be collected, used, stored and disposed of and I agree to abide by those legal restrictions and respect the confidentiality and privacy of all information and data.

I understand that all information and data provided to me in the course of my role on this research project is to be used solely for the purpose of performing my duties. I agree to protect the confidentiality, privacy and physical security of the information I receive and to use it only for the purpose(s) for which I have been granted access.

I will not divulge either orally or in writing to any third party (either during my engagement or thereafter) any private personal and/or confidential information or data of which I may become aware in the course of my duties except as may be necessary within the mandate of my responsibilities on this project.

I hereby agree to abide by the restrictions placed on this information by the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA), the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) and any other pertinent privacy statute, which is now or may later be in force.

Upon completion of my duties, I agree to return to *Connie Taylor* at Queen’s University in its entirety, all information or data obtained during the course of my mandate and further agree not to retain copies of any information or data that belongs to this project.

Dated this ______ day of ______________, 20__.

Signature: ________________________________