Wisdom for Life: Cultivating Self, Society, and Nature

Course ID SEM-UG1834   Fall 2015
Fri 12:30-3:10   1 Washington Place 527
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Office hours (please schedule in advance): Tues (2:00 to 3:00) and Thursday (2:00 to 6:00)

We live in a time of tremendous challenge: climate change, overconsumption, inequality, financial instability, political conflict, epidemics, rising life style diseases, rising diagnosis of mental illness, and unsustainable happiness and well being. These challenges signal the need for social and political change and increasingly they signal the need for personal and interpersonal change. We need change at these multiple levels to help reverse these problems and to cope with how these problems impact our lives. In this class, we will think of this change as developing “wisdom for life.”

A key question we explore in this class is why wisdom, why now? How has it come to be that the other areas of knowledge that we could turn to (philosophy, religion, science, politics, business, psychology, sociology, the arts) seem unlikely to be sufficient?

Another key question is what would wisdom for life look like for each of us? How could wisdom give meaning and purpose to our individual lives in relation to larger metanarratives of nature and culture? What would it mean, in other words, to see today’s overarching challenges as opportunity for creatively reimagining ourselves and the stories we tell about ourselves? What ways does it make sense to call this “wisdom?” And, if we use wisdom as a telos for our narratives, what kind of wisdom story, or genealogy of wisdom, can we craft from psychological,
philosophical, religious, aesthetic, and activists traditions for creating visions for human life in harmony with itself and with nature? Finally, how might we cultivate strategies for putting these wisdom stories into practice for ourselves and our community?

To explore answers to these questions we need a story of past efforts to develop wisdom. This class works to help develop that story.

Course Objectives:

1. Develop a narrative of Western culture that helps explain the relevance of wisdom for contemporary life.
2. Understand the links between wisdom and post-secular culture.
3. Consider the relationship of wisdom to the environment, society, and personal happiness.
4. Practice writing papers with clear thesis statements that organize a range of interdisciplinary materials and develop big picture perspectives.

Texts:

Plato: *Trial and Death of Socrates: Four Dialogues*
Caputo: *Philosophy and Theology*
Woolf: *To the Lighthouse*
West: *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom*
Macy: *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy*

Schedule:

1. (9/4) **Introduction: Why Wisdom, Why Now?**
   
   NYT’s article: How to Live Wisely

2. (9/11) **Science of Wisdom**
   
   Birren and Svensson: Wisdom in History
   Siegel and Germer: Wisdom and Compassion
Ardelt: The Paradoxical Nature of Personal Wisdom  
Ferrari: Stories of Wisdom to Live By: Developing Wisdom in a Narrative Mode

Take Wisdom Assessment (and bring score to class):  
http://www.nytimes.com/ref/magazine/20070430_WISDOM.html?_r=0

NYT’s article: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/13/business/retirementspecial/the-science-of-older-and-wiser.html

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom

3. (9/18) Wisdom: A Western Genealogy—Socrates and Biblical Wisdom Books  
Plato: Death of Socrates (Apology, Crito, Phaedo)  
Bible: Wisdom Books selections: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom

Caputo Intro and Ch 1  
Hadot: Figure of Socrates (What is Ancient Philosophy)  
DeBotton: Consolations of Philosophy Ch 2  
Epicurus: selections

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom

5. (10/2) Wisdom: A Western Genealogy—Christian Mysticism  
Caputo Ch 2, 3, 4  
McGinn: Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism (selections)  
Reimer: Spirituality of Andre Rublev’s Icon of the Holy Trinity

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom

In Class: Scenes from Andre Rublev by Tarkovski

6. (10/9) Wisdom: A Western Genealogy—Kant and Schopenhauer  
Kant—World Philosophy selections and What is Enlightenment?  
De Botton: Consolations of Philosophy (Ch 5)  
Schopenhauer: From Wisdom of Life essay  
Cooper: Schopenhauer and Indian Philosophy

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom

Paper in 2 Weeks

7. (10/16) Wisdom: A Western Genealogy—Romantics and Transcendentalists  
Shi: Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in America (intro and ch 6) (34 pgs)

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom

**Paper Next Week**

8. (10/23) **Wisdom: A Western Genealogy—Science Studies and Postmodernism**
   Caputo 5, 6
   Sismondo: Introduction to Science Studies
   Latour: Never Modern (Ch 1 and 4 selections)
   Rorty: Science or Objectivity

   Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom

   In Class: James Lovelock Documentary

   **Paper Due** (8 pages—see end of syllabus for instructions)

   Please pick a week’s reading and develop a thesis that connects that week’s reading to the others so far. Use readings up through class 7.
   Example Thesis Sentences:
   a.) The science of wisdom successfully (unsuccessfully) resonates with a range of wisdom writers up through the Transcendentalists.
   a.) Many of the seeds of wisdom can be seen in Socrates (or the biblical Wisdom texts or Epicurus).
   b.) Mystical writers open a necessary door to wisdom. Or, another way to say it, without mystical thinking wisdom is not possible.
   c.) Schopenhauer’s development of Kantian philosophy captures key motifs of wisdom.
   d.) In a nutshell, “wisdom for life” could be called “plain living, high thinking.”

9. (10/30) **Wisdom: A Western Genealogy—Postsecularism**
   Caputo 7, 8 (14 pgs)
   Ricoeur: Critique of Religion, Language of Faith, Listening to the Parables of Jesus
   Kearney: Ricoeur and Biblical Hermeneutics: On Post-Religious Faith
   Schultzbauer, Mahoney: American Scholars Return to Studying Religion and Habermas: Notes on Post-Secular Society

   Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom

   In class: Kearney: God Perhaps (reading)

10. (11/6) **Literary Interlude**
Woolf: To the Lighthouse  
Kearney: Anatheism: Returning to God after God (Woolf section)  

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom  

11. (11/13) Wisdom Exemplar: Cornel West  
West: Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom  
Smiet: Post/Secular Truths: Sojourner Truth and the intersections of gender, race, religion  

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom  

Rewrites Due  

12. (11/20) Wisdom of Gaia  
Latour—ch 3-6 Facing Gaia: Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature  

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom  

In Class: James Lovelock Documentary  

Thanksgiving Recess (11/26-27)  

13. (12/4) Wisdom Exemplar: Thomas Berry  
Berry: Selected Writings (Ch 1, 8, 10, 12)  
Rothberg: Awakening for all Beings (and The Most Important Spiritual Topic)  

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom  

Macy: Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy  
Wickstrom, Illman: Environmentalism as a Trend in Post-Secular Society  

Tolstoy: Calendar of Wisdom  

Final Paper Due Dec 15 (8 pages): Please develop one of our “wisdom exemplars” with the other readings from the second half of the class.  

Examples Thesis Sentences:  

a.) Navigating a post-secular world with wisdom requires what Cornel West calls “hope on a tightrope.”  
b.) Navigating a post-secular world with wisdom requires that we develop a new story, what Thomas Berry calls our “Great Work.”  
c.) Navigating a post-secular world with wisdom requires what Joanna Macy calls “active hope.”
Course Requirements

Grades are based on three parts: attendance/participation (1/3) and 2 papers (1/3 each). Late papers are graded down. There will be an opportunity to rewrite the first paper if you desire. The attendance/participation grade is composed of weekly class readings, participation, and attendance. There can be one excused absence for the class. After that, I drop a letter grade from your attendance/participation grade for each missed class.

Class will generally begin with a short presentation on the material for that week. Class discussion will be initiated by your selections from the material. To prepare for class discussion, please type a quote for each week’s reading (include author and page numbers so we can find your quotes). Follow each quote with a sentence or two commentary explaining why you picked the quote. We will go around the class in random order reading and discussing the quotes selected. The quotes are then passed in at the end of each class.

Papers are 8 pages type written, double spaced. Please use the material from the class to develop a topic I hand out (or a similar topic of your own making). Back up your thesis with arguments and examples from the class readings. Please include internal citations with page numbers and a reference list at the end. A good paper demonstrates that you have integrated the material from the readings and class discussions and can use it to analyze your topic. Use the bulk of your energy reading closely and thinking seriously about the materials you have (rather than doing outside research). Also, be sure and give your paper a title.

The grading scale for the papers will be as follows: A+ (98), A (95), A- (91), B+ (89), B (85), B- (81), C+ (79), C (75), C- (71), D (65), and F (number below 65).

The grading scale for the class will be as follows: 93-100% (A) 90-92 (A-), 87-89 (B+), 83-86 (B), 80-82 (B-), 77-79 (C+), 70-76 (C), 63-69 (D), and below (F).

Academic Integrity

“As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating.” For more information, please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)