

## Wisdom

What is Wisdom? It means more than being smart. I've known smart people who were in no way wise unless you mean worldly-wise, i.e. alert to the tricks of the trade. On the other hand I've known illiterate people who were oracles of wisdom. One was my Italian-born grandmother whom my Aunt Lena described as "dumb-smart" - in other words, a person who in any gathering might appear somewhat "out of it" but was quietly wise to everything that was going on. My grandmother knew precisely where she was in the universe - something that can't be said of so many pundits who worry over who we are, where we are and what's it all about - and produce inconclusive and expensive books on the subject. My grandmother could have answered all those questions convincingly with a smile, if she thought them worth asking.

So what was it she had? Intuition? Some sixth sense? Obviously it's something more than intelligence. It's something that wells up from the gut, the heart, so that people who refuse to allow feeling to contaminate their thought processes are not likely to be very wise. And I would caution one about taking their advice based solely on their credentials. Go to my grandmother instead.

There's a scene in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* about an aristocratic Catholic family in Britain that illustrates what I'm trying to say. Toward the end of the novel Lord Marchmain has returned to his estate to die. Cara, his Italian mistress, has accompanied him and now Cara and Marchmain's grown children, Brideshead, Julia and Cordelia, have gathered to discuss when it would be prudent to call for a priest for the last rites and communion. They're concerned that Lord Marchmain, a very strong willed apostate, might cause a scene. Charles Ryder, Julia's agnostic fiancé, is present. To him their discussion seems inane. He proposes they leave the poor man alone. But no, on they go, arguing just when would be the best opportunity, until Charles asks impatiently, "I wish someone would explain to me quite what the significance of these sacraments is."

His request creates no little confusion. The family had never before been asked to explain things like the Anointing of the Sick. They slip into a conflicting exchange of pious opinions: "I think my nurse told me . . . You've got it all wrong, Cara . . . Well, I remember when Alphonse de Grenet died . . . Madame Grenet thought . . . Well, she was wrong. . . I never heard that before." Charles is not impressed. Obviously they have no clear idea on why a priest must be called. Why won't they just let the man die in peace? His logic reduces them to silence. "There was a pause in which Julia sighed and Brideshead drew breath as though to start further subdividing the propositions."

Then: "In the silence Cara said, 'All I know is that I shall take very good care to have a priest.' 'Bless you,' said Cordelia. 'I believe that's the best answer.'" Cara's gut, Cara's heart has spoken and wins delightful Cordelia's spontaneous confirmation. Wisdom has spoken out of a logic Charles Ryder could not presently fathom but would begin to ponder when he later beheld the comatose apostate Lord Marchmain himself slowly raise his hand to his forehead, breast and shoulders in response to a priest's request for a sign of faith.

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