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# The Search for Wisdom and Meaning

**HELENA BJORKMAN HAD BEEN CAMERA SHY HER ENTIRE LIFE.** Even as a child, she avoided the spotlight and didn't like being the center of attention. Others found this odd since her very presence radiated a natural essence that every lens loved. There had never been anything particular about her features to define her beauty, but there was certainly something about her. Whenever she was included in a group photo, such as her high school forensics team or class confirmation photo, hers was the first face people noticed, and even as they looked at the others, their eyes kept going back to her. People gravitated toward her without knowing why. She was typically quiet and a bit shy, with a heart that seemed to express itself through her kind, gentle eyes. This is what people noticed, although they didn't realize it. And they couldn't look away.

Now, decades later and in her seventies, Helena still doesn't like cameras, and she wants no part of social media. "Attention is a gift of great value when given, but

of no value when received,” she told her grandson Max, who was following her around the kitchen with his iPhone, recording everything she said.

“It means a lot to me that you’re doing this, Grandma. I know you don’t like it, but it’s for school. It’s an assignment.”

“You’re thirteen years old. You’re perfectly capable of being annoying without the job being assigned as a school project.” Her wide smile and the lilt in her voice assured Max she was just teasing. She set a plate of cookies on the table and sat down. “Well, let’s get on with it, then. We’ll talk until these cookies are gone, and I’m only eating one, so you’d better get crackin’ or you’ll be late for soccer practice.”

“Grandma,” Max said as he focused his phone on her seasoned face, “who is the wisest person you ever met?”

The older woman wrapped both hands around her coffee mug and stared at the ceiling for a bit. “You know, Max, sadly, I haven’t met a lot of people who I would say are wise. There are a lot of people who know a lot of things, or at least think they do, but there are very few who are truly wise. There’s a big difference between knowledge and wisdom, and I’d say right now the world needs a lot more wisdom to catch up with all the knowledge.”

She paused and let that hang in the air. Max looked a little perplexed, and she realized her answer wasn’t all that helpful. It was more theoretical than concrete, and seventh graders need things to be concrete. She continued, “But I have been blessed to have known a few very wise people. The wisest, I’d say, would have been your Great

Grandfather and my father-in-law, Anders Bjorkman. I think one of the reasons I married your grandpa Lars was that he was so heavily influenced by the wisdom of his own father.” She fidgeted with her thin, gold wedding band as she spoke, recalling that it was the same ring Anders had given to his wife, who would have been her mother-in-law had she lived. For a moment she lost herself in thought about how our lives are touched by people we never meet. She chose her words carefully, fully aware that she was now a conduit through which Max’s life was being touched by Anders Bjorkman, a man she grew to love and respect, but whom Max would never know personally. “Anders had a thoughtful and measured way about him,” she continued. “He was a deep-thinking Christian man, and whenever there was a tough decision to make, he’d lean back in his chair, take a deep drag on his pipe, and then he’d slowly say, ‘Well, commit your error on the side of compassion.’ That’s wise advice; words to live by.”

Max turned the camera on himself to ask his follow-up. “What did he mean by that?”


“I think he meant that life is, well, it’s often complicated. The road ahead is seldom clear. We have to make decisions without knowing what’s best or sometimes even knowing what’s right. The wise person, Anders would say, always chooses the most compassionate option.”

“How do you know what’s most compassionate?” Max asked as he shoved a cookie in his mouth with one hand while keeping his phone pointed with the other. “Sorry about the crumbs. I’m not good at eating with my left hand.”

“Compassion isn’t something we can know. It’s something we must feel. So, it doesn’t help to think about it; we have to contemplate it. Meditate on it. You really

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have to get in touch with your soul to discern which path is the most loving, and even then it won’t necessarily be clear.” Recognizing that wheels were turning inside her grandson’s head, Helena made up an excuse about needing to check the dryer so he would have a little space to process his thoughts.



As she was leaving the room, Max called out, “Grandma, while you’re doing that, would you think about the next question: How does someone become wise?”

“Life was a lot easier,” she called back, “when you just wanted to know where babies come from!” She had created some time and space for Max to ponder, but it turned out she needed it for herself. It’s funny how the spirit works. We think we’re giving others what they need, and we end up getting what we need. Usually, the return is not this immediate, but in this case, Helena was glad it was. She was seventy-one years old and was sure Max thought she was elderly. She was, after all, a card-carrying AARP member, and she had stopped dying her hair right about the time Max was born. Still, she didn’t think of herself as old, not by a long shot. Sure, she didn’t like social

media, but that wasn't because she was old; it's because she thought it was an utter waste of time and energy. No, she wasn't old, but she did think of herself as having entered the wisdom stage of life, and now this thirteen-year-old kid was sitting in her kitchen expecting her to tell him in fifteen minutes what it took her a lifetime to discover—that wisdom starts when you stop thinking you have the answers. And he wanted answers. “Jesus, Joseph, and Mary,” she whispered under her breath, “you'd better grab the helm and steer this submarine, because I'm in way over my head.”

Helena returned to the room and sat down. “Listen,” she said.

“OK,” Max replied with his phone's lens fixed on her. “Go ahead. I'm listening.”

“No,” Helena responded. “I'm not asking you to listen, I'm telling you that listening is the answer. You asked how someone becomes wise, and that's the answer—they listen.”

“Like to what? To music? Listen to music?”

“Yes, to music. But not just to the music; listen to the silence between the notes. Listen to the lyrics, the pauses, and the breaths. Listen to everything, Max. Listen to everything and to nothing. Listen to the sounds of the forest, the hush of the breeze, and the silence of the sunrise. Listen to the anxieties of the rich and the cries of the poor, to the giggles of small children and the creaking bones of the aged. Listen to all of it, but mostly listen to the whispers of the spirit inside you. If you want the gift of wisdom, then quiet the voices in your own head, turn down the volume of your own thoughts, and listen. Let the Creator speak to

you through all of creation. Anders once told me that the reason there is so little wisdom in the world is because we are too preoccupied with the smallness between our own ears, so we never open ourselves to the greatness of God's infinite wholeness."

She took a ponderous sip of her coffee and a deep breath. "One time your grandpa Lars and I went up to see the northern lights, and while I was yammering on about how magnificent they are, he said, 'Shh, we can't listen to them if we're talking.' Anders had coached him from little on to listen to beauty."

Max jumped in, "Wait just a minute, Grandma. Were my Bjorkman ancestors into magic mushrooms or something? How do you listen to light and color? There is no sound."

"A wise person's experience is not limited by the laws of physics, Max. Hearing and listening are two different things. We hear sound, but we listen to meaning. And you can't listen with the ears on your head, you must listen with what Saint Benedict called the ear of the heart." She looked into his eyes to read whether any of this was registering. Max had brown eyes like his mother, but they were deep and penetrating like his grandfather's. It struck her that he was gifted with the dimensional vision of a sage, able to see both the surface and the depths of life. This would prove useful over the years ahead, but he would need to learn great patience and forgiveness lest he grow cynical. For now, still in the morning sunlight of youthful innocence, he was completely unaware of this gift. He hadn't walked through life's desert yet. That would come in its own time, and she was responsible for preparing him

to face the trials and temptations he, like all of us, would face. “Hearing happens in the connections between our ears and our brains,” she clarified. “It’s physical and neurological. But listening happens in the connection between our minds and our souls, a connection that travels straight through our hearts. It’s spiritual. So, you see, when we love, we listen; and when we listen, we grow in love. They go together. We struggle with this because we’re enamored with our own thoughts; we don’t ever get out of our own heads. How will you ever carry peace into another person’s heart if you can’t get out of your own head?”

Max set down his phone and held his head in both hands. This was more than he had signed up for, but he had no desire to back out. He wanted to go deeper. “That’s a lot to think about, Grandma. I’m trying to listen, but there’s not enough sugar in all these cookies to get my brain up to speed with yours.”

Helena smiled at the young man who was discovering mystery for the first time but was still under the illusion that all mysteries can be solved by the time a movie ends. How do you tell a curious thirteen-year-old that questions have more value than answers—that questions keep drawing you deeper into mystery, but answers cause you to stop searching? How do you tell someone who is excited about figuring out life that, like God and love, life is not something we can ever know or understand; it’s something we can only embrace and experience, but that’s far more rewarding?

“Often the best way to get your mind up to speed is to slow down your brain,” she said.



“Aren’t they the same thing, your brain and your mind? How can I accelerate my mind by slowing down my brain? Isn’t that like saying I can drive faster by slowing down the car?”

“Your analogy holds up, Max, only if the sole purpose for driving the car is to arrive at a destination. But what if you are in the car with family or friends? What if the purpose of driving the car is to journey together? Or to appreciate the marvel of the car’s engineering? Or to have some alone time and listen to a podcast or an audio book? Or just to contemplate the beauty of the nature you’re driving through? In all those cases, you can accelerate deeper into your real purpose by slowing down. Going fast is counterproductive.”

“I get impatient in the car, and my dad keeps telling me that the journey is the reward. Is this what he means?”

“I would think so, yes. Life isn’t about function, Max. It’s about experience. It’s about growth, discovery, and relationships. Do you remember how excited you were when you got your Xbox?”

“Yeah, I had been wanting one for a long time?”

“Why? Do you recall why you wanted one so badly?”

“Because they’re cool, Grandma.”

“Riiight...but I thought you told me that cool is an inside thing, that you’re cool on the inside and nothing on the outside can make you cool. That’s what you said when I told you broccoli would make you cool.”

“Sure, but you can’t play games online with your friends using broccoli. You need an Xbox for that.”

“I see. So that’s why you wanted an Xbox? To play games with your friends?”

“Yeah. Some of my friends live far away. My best friend, Henri, moved to Toronto. So every Tuesday and Friday night is game night.”

“And when you play these games, do you talk to each other? Or do you just shoot down spaceships?”

“We have headsets so we’re talking to each other the whole time.”

“I see. And do you just talk about the game, or do you talk about other things?”

“I don’t know. We talk about a lot of stuff. I mean, we talk about the game we’re playing, about strategy and stuff, but sometimes we talk about other junk. Henri’s parents are going through a divorce, so we’ve been talking about that some. You know, it’s kind of a tough time for him and his little sister.”

Helena gave that air in which to circle above the table for a minute. Max had reached the apex of the conversation on his own without realizing it, so she would give it time to come in for a soft landing. Finally, she lit the runway to guide it in. “So the Xbox isn’t about an Xbox at all, is it? It’s about connection and relationship with Henri and your other friends; is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah, that’s true. It’s not about the machine; it’s about spending time with my friends.”

“And there you have it, Max. That’s what makes life meaningful, isn’t it? Wisdom is the awareness that life isn’t about the things that make us feel good or give us comfort, it’s about loving each other and being there for one another.

er. It's not about the stuff we have or the things we know; it's about the love we share. Everything else is temporary. That phone you're holding, the Xbox you prize, even this time you're spending in the seventh grade—it all passes. The only thing that lasts is love. That's forever. The wise person sees this, believes this, and invests their whole life in this.”

Max turned the phone back on himself, “There you have it, straight from the wisest woman I know. If you want meaning in your life, start by listening and end with loving. Nothing else will get you there.”

Helena looked at the empty plate on Max's side of the table. “It looks like even cookies are temporary, Max.”