

## Ordinary Sages

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For thousands of years, cultures around the world have extolled the value of wise men and women as cultural and social resources. Much of the literature on wisdom promotes an image of the sage as a super-humanly wise person who is as rare as the snow leopard. But for the past thirty years I have been observing, interviewing, and listening to the stories of ordinary sages—everyday people from all walks of life who have matured spiritually and gradually developed the qualities and skills we associate with the wise sage. Especially among older adults, finding people who are able to be wise is not difficult. Our difficulty is that we are not trained to look for them or even to understand well the vital role sages can play in every kind of human group. I have watched people intentionally develop into sages over time, which indicates that being able to manifest as a sage is a possibility to which each of us can aspire. I have also watched people naturally and unintentionally evolve into sages.

So, what was I observing in these people? Here are some of the qualities that led me to identify someone as a sage:

*Spiritual depth*: deep familiarity with one's own experiential connection with the sacred, including one's sacred inner self as well as the sacred core permeating the universe. Spiritual depth provides a glorious place to abide amid the ups and downs of personal and social life.

*Equanimity* stems from spiritual depth. It is a capacity to remain in touch with inner stillness and “peace that passeth understanding” as the swirl of life goes on. Equanimity lovingly embraces both joy and disappointment.

*Openness* is a necessary element of learning and healthy relationship. Openness involves an ability to resist the temptation toward polarization and premature closure. Openness is inclusive and respectful of divergent points of view. Openness is based on essential curiosity about the many mysteries of life. The inner space realized by spiritual depth is itself the ultimate openness.

*Presence* is the ability to focus attention intensely on the experiential here and now and resist the urge to dwell mainly in a fabricated world of language, concept and thought. The presence of the sage attracts us because we sense that the sage is really here with us.

*Clearness* is the ability to see things as they are, unclouded by desire or fear. Clearness requires a certain kind of transcendence--being able to stand outside the personal self with its agendas, cravings and dreads and see situations more objectively.

*Compassion* involves seeing suffering clearly and feeling motivated to address it. Sages understand that sometimes the best thing we can do for people who are suffering is simply to abide with them so they do not have to struggle alone.

*Sagely Knowledge* is a by-product of life experience that has been thoroughly reflected upon with spiritual depth. The knowledge of the sage is more often contemplative, big-picture knowledge rather than technical or calculative knowledge.

*Humility* is another by-product of being able to transcend the personal self. When we see ourselves for the utter fools we sometimes are and accept this as inevitably human, we can have compassion and humility for ourselves.

What are some of the skills I observed in sages?

*Compassionate listening* invites trust into any situation. The speaker knows that she or he is being respectfully and openly listened to. First and foremost the

listener listens and is prepared to wait patiently and attentively while the speaker forms thoughts and expresses them. The compassionate listener obviously respects the person speaking and any feedback is given in a loving way, even when it is very direct.

*Non-adversarial communication* styles stress the matter-of-fact rather than concepts of good or bad, right or wrong, blame or guilt. Sages' messages invite cohesion-building contemplation and reflection rather than alienation-inducing winner-take-all debates and polarization.

Partly because of their deep reserves of reflected-upon life experience, sages *sense deeper questions* and encourage getting to the heart of issues. Sages are skilled at *discernment*, seeing the essence of things.

The openness of the sage results in a high degree of *comfort with diverse points of view*. The presence of the sage invites openness and is a field within which wider dialogue can happen.

Sages can *remain spiritually centered* even if much confusion is going on around them. The ability of the sage to remain unflappable is very valuable in stressful situations.

These qualities and skills develop over time. Few sages have every quality or skill I have listed, but many sages have most of them. If we know what to look for in a sage, we may find that sages are by no means rare, especially among elders. We may also begin to observe the many positive contributions sages make in a wide variety of situations. Invite a sage into your life today and see what happens. Acknowledge the sage in yourself and those around you and see what happens. Observe how actions and experiences are affected by the presence of sages. Pay attention to the qualities and skills of the sages you see, and you may find that the presence of sages brings much-needed spiritual, relational, and practical balance to the world we live in. You may become as puzzled as I am that

as a society we are not more eager to identify our sages and ask for their help. Nonetheless, ordinary sages continue to quietly and unobtrusively have their very positive effects on the world around them.