

RUNNING HEAD: WISDOM CIRCLE

The Wisdom of Sages: They Drew a Circle and Took Me In

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## Abstract

After three decades of practice, the author of this article is a recognized expert in several local and family history topics. However, when a traditionally successful research strategy continued to provide diminished results, the author was unable to understand the phenomenon. In an attempt to gain insight, the author contacted the non-profit, all-volunteer Elder Wisdom Circle ("EWC"). Surprised by their responses and motivated by the realization that accumulated knowledge is not wisdom, the author discovered EWC is a source of learning not only for the 4,000 individuals who request advice each month but for its members, aged 60-105, who both teach and learn daily.

### The Wisdom of Sages: They Drew a Circle and Took Me In

“The next best thing to being wise oneself is to live in a circle of those who are.” — C. S. Lewis (Martindale & Root, 1990, p. 233)

After thirty-two years as a family and local historian, I am a recognized expert on several topics. My advice is sought almost daily. Some might say I have earned the opportunity to stand on an intellectual pedestal. While I may have developed a substantial cache of historical knowledge, I was recently surprised and pleased to discover even experts can benefit from lifelong learning.

When teaching budding genealogists, I always recommend the strategy that has been a standard of researchers for decades: begin shaking information from your family tree by calling, writing, and visiting elder family members and asking for details about people and events from the past. I try to impress on everyone the immediacy inherent in this task, since we never know when a treasure trove of family memories will become inaccessible. An old African proverb warns, “Every time an old person dies, it is as if a library has burned down” (Walden, 2007; quote in various forms is most often attributed to Alex Haley).

Twenty years ago, the experience of one of my students reinforced the need for expedience when contacting elder relatives. Two days after learning in my class how to effectively perform an oral history interview, Debbie Ivens spent several hours questioning her grandfather about his heritage and life memories. Three days later, Debbie attended her grandfather’s funeral. She told the class, “It was a complete surprise. It’s like he was just waiting for me to talk to him so he could leave” (D. Ivens, personal communication, n. d.).

Despite the proven success of this research staple, family historians have been hindered by a decline in responses to telephone and mail inquiries during the past decade. Consulting with other seasoned researchers and giving a great deal of thought to the matter did not help me understand the phenomenon. I was frustrated by my inability to find an explanation for what I perceived as unwillingness of elders to participate in the quest for their heritage. Inspired by an article about a new-to-me

resource, I turned to an on-line panel for advice. Their answers were astounding.

The Elder Wisdom Circle (“EWC”) is a non-profit, non-sectarian, and all-volunteer organization founded in 2001 by San Franciscan Doug Meckelson as a way to honor his late grandmother, who felt Americans do not respect older citizens when they are unable to live independently. Thus, elders lose dignity and experience disconnection from society. Meckelson recalls, “She was sure I had the ability to change the way society views seniors. From that challenge, EWC was born” (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008).

Six hundred people, aged 60-105 and living across the U. S. and Canada, participate in EWC individually from their homes or in groups at assisted living communities (using a facilitator). Volunteers prefer fluid membership and participation because structure interferes with their other activities, such as travel. Most are affluent and well-educated, but EWC volunteers represent every demographic and educational stratum. While there are multiple centenarians, the average age is 75. Gender is split evenly among those under 75, with mostly women over 75.

EWC gives elders something important to do, a rare opportunity for many before they became members. Volunteers, who refer to themselves as “cyber-grandparents,” have 45,000 years’ aggregate life experience available to answer up to 4,000 on-line letters each month — over 100,000 so far. Subjects range from sex to gardening to personal hygiene to facing loss. The only off-limits subjects are medical, legal, tax, and financial advice, despite the fact that many EWC volunteers are credentialed professionals. While an Internet search can provide fast answers to many questions received by EWC, the search results rarely provide wisdom. Meckelson observes, “As long as elders retain their cognitive abilities, why should information-seekers turn to younger folks who know less for advice?” (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008).

EWC guarantees that every letter will be answered. Most come from people aged from teens to thirties (“cyber-grandkids”), many of whom are in crisis. The anonymous letters receive a personalized response, often from someone with direct

experience. For anonymity, all mail delivery is handled by an automated system. Yet, humans screen incoming messages for appropriateness and review elders' responses for quality before they are forwarded to the enquirers.

EWC does not promote itself as a penpal or mentoring service. Cyber-grandparents and cyber-grandkids typically exchange one or two messages. Yet, in that brief relationship, profound learning often occurs on both sides of the digital mailbox. Cyber-grandkids get first-hand confirmation that life does go on, and today's challenges will usually be tomorrow's triumphs. Meckelson notes, "It's hard to get young people to listen to elders because they think all 'old' people fit society's stereotyping of elders as ultraconservative, sexless, disinterested in modern culture, and preachy" (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008). EWC's cyber-grandkids quickly discover many elders remain vital, caring, and connected.

EWC volunteers' opinions typically reflect the values of their generations, but the elders don't always agree with each other. Meckelson observes, "There is a vast difference of opinion about pot-smoking, for example, between today's 60 and 90 year olds" (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008). Elders who do not have regular contact with young folks may not be up-to-date on contemporary issues, many of which are simply traditional life challenges that have evolved over time. For example, cyber-grandparents may not have experienced self-mutilation or know the reasons for it, but they all have experienced loss or a sensation of being out of control and can share those feelings through their responses. More important, EWC volunteers take the initiative to learn about current trends and new (to them) topics in order to provide better answers. A 90-year-old may not understand a teen's reference to unanswered IM's (instant messaging), but the elder can relate to unreturned phone calls or letters.

Moore (1923) writes, "The mind petrifies if a circle be drawn around it" (p. 198). However, engaging elders' minds in a circle of activity forestalls mental atrophy and stimulates development. Meckelson boasts, "EWC is proof: learning happens as you age!" (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008). For EWC volunteers, learning encompasses skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Meckelson believes,

“More than anything, our volunteers ‘soften’ and become more empathetic. They have the opportunity to compare their lives with relative stability — financial, health, and resources — to those of others whose life problems present instability. As a result, our cyber-grandparents overflow with compassion” (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008). Meckelson credits this intrapersonal evolution to EWC volunteers’ realization they are helping people. “It’s a big compliment to ask someone for advice. It’s as though you hold him or her in a state of reverence. Elders are honored by this, and they respond accordingly” (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008).

EWC volunteers love international letters, which provide an opportunity to connect with other cultures. Through the medium of on-line connectivity, most EWC volunteers are discovering that the world is, indeed, a global village. They also experience intercultural learning and diversity awareness, leading to new levels of receptiveness they almost unanimously agree would not have been possible otherwise — at least not reached as quickly or completely.

Perhaps the greatest learning for EWC volunteers comes from looking backward: realizing how much knowledge and experience they’ve acquired over the years and discovering they do have answers. This realization leads to a self-assurance that is critical to enhancing their quality of life. Why, then, is it so difficult for young and old to share without an intermediary such as EWC? Meckelson laments, “Americans don’t grasp the concept of intergenerational communication. Old people aren’t viewed as interesting unless they are funny or try to be hip” (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008). Both individually and as a group, EWC volunteers maintain their integrity. Unlike some media personalities, the volunteers do not use profanity or talk about sex gratuitously just to keep young folks interested. Meckelson emphasizes, “Our volunteers take the opportunities to learn and to teach quite seriously” (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008).

Meckelson has a background in business management, so why isn’t EWC bigger or better known? He observes, “Nothing is as easy as you think it should be. Just because a business is run well doesn’t mean it will expand” (D. Meckelson, personal

communications, January 2-18, 2008). EWC refuses to grow at the cost of its mission, even turning down funding that is tethered to external influences or requirements to change. The organization's vision, developed by Meckelson, has not varied. He explains,

“We want to give elders self-esteem and a platform. There is a huge number of incredibly sharp individuals in their 80s and 90s. There are people in their 60s who have been retired for a couple of years and are feeling disconnected from society. We don't just want to keep them busy” (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008).

Meckelson describes the amalgamated sense of group integrity and personal investment held by EWC volunteers and board members: “If they think money or resources will require a change to the core of EWC, they're very quick to tell potential funders to look elsewhere” (D. Meckelson, personal communications, January 2-18, 2008).

Implementing systems to handle the increasing volume of mail and pay overhead costs requires investment, but EWC has been unable to identify sources of private or governmental funding for this type of intergenerational activity. Meckelson wants to open the volunteer ranks of EWC, because hundreds of elders are anxious to participate. He hopes 2008 will bring an altruistic grantor who will make that possible.

What astounding advice did I receive? I asked EWC for suggestions on ways to engage senior citizens in family history and improve the response rate to inquiries. Two members responded. One provided an answer I had already considered, while the other confounded me. Writing on how to engage family elders' interest in history, “Heritage” suggests that those not suffering from dementia or other barriers simply might be unaware of the value younger people place on memories and experiences. A prolific EWC volunteer, “Tell-Tom,” writes, “Elders I know care deeply about legacy and history. It is, after all, what they hold dear” (“Tell-Tom,” personal communication, March 20, 2007).

Tell-Tom offered a startling explanation for the lack of responses to inquiries: “Identity theft is an exponentially growing threat, and elders are especially vulnerable.

Their families or caretakers, if present, are even more attuned to this problem” (“Tell-Tom,” personal communication, March 20, 2007). Though we recognize the threat of identity theft, family historians are motivated to correctly assign identities. Tell-Tom’s answer was a complete surprise to me and others I have discussed it with because historians rarely think of information-gathering as a way to perpetuate fraud. We have never imagined our inquiries would be misconstrued.

Tell-Tom advises that personal information about individuals and family groups should not be sought until elders know the enquirers and develop a “legitimate relationship.” His warning contains a wake-up call for genealogists: “I don’t wish this to sound harsh, but [sending] a letter requesting personal data with a stamped self-addressed envelope is hopelessly naive and may result in your being placed on a watch list by federal law enforcement.” Alternatively, he suggests, “meeting people on their own turf with initial introductory letters seeking no such data may reap phenomenal reward” (“Tell-Tom,” personal communication, March 20, 2007).

The response from Heritage closed with advice I routinely give my students: “The best thing you can do is start preserving the stories that are all around you: journal, keep scrapbooks, and preserve pictures. Do for your offspring what you wish had been done for you” (“Heritage,” personal communication, March 20, 2007). That is wise counsel!

The inimitable Pearl Bailey declared, “Never, never rest contented with any circle of ideas, but always be certain that a wider one is still possible” (McElrath, 2008, par. 16). Both Heritage and Tell-Tom provided answers that opened my eyes to new dimensions of the problem my colleagues and I face, helping me reconsider our methodologies. Despite the fact it means the passage of time and youth, I look forward to reaching the minimum age for EWC membership. While I’m sure EWC can widen to include one more elder, I just hope I develop sufficient wisdom to hold my own among this venerable “circle of ideas.”



Sidebar:

*The Elder Wisdom Circle Guide for a Meaningful Life* (Plume Books, 2007; ISBN 978-0452288812) contains a compilation of letters and responses. EWC advice is syndicated in two dozen U. S. newspapers. For more information, visit <[www.elderwisdomcircle.org](http://www.elderwisdomcircle.org)>.

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