**Wisdom Figures**

**Teacher Background**

In traditional cultures wisdom was usually associated with the elders of the tribe or group. Wisdom was thought of as something that comes with the accumulated experiences of a long life well lived. In contemporary times some of this association of wisdom with age is still attached to elders. In contemporary Western cultures, the association of wisdom with the elderly is less strong, though still present. The consequent importance and status in the community of the elderly is thereby diminished. In Western societies, we may recognise an elderly Nelson Mandela as a wisdom figure but our perceptions of him as wise may only be partly associated with his age as such and more with his life and leadership as a whole.

Contemporary Western cultures tend to worship fame and celebrity and consequently give less importance to wisdom. Still the pursuit of wisdom is not altogether absent from our Western culture. Many Westerners seek wisdom in the East, visiting Ashrams in India, Buddhist monasteries in Thailand and Christian centres of retreat such as L’Arche in France and the isle of Iona in Scotland in search of wisdom and insight about life in general and their own lives in particular. Bookshops contain many volumes of a self-help variety where one can purchase the accumulated wisdom of former cancer sufferers, the bereaved, the financially successful and those who have lived with, moved through and overcome the trials and tribulations of life.

Many though, can find wisdom figures closer to home. Sometimes these figures can be older people, as with grandparents or the elderly neighbour across the street. At other times people seek out a mentor and this could be a slightly older student or colleague, a professional life counsellor, a parent, or just someone who seems to have had experience that is deemed to be helpful.

**Wise words**

**Teacher Background**

Every culture has a way of recording and passing on the accumulated wisdom and practical advice of previous generations. ‘Wise words’ and ‘wisdom literature’ are present not only in the Bible but also in the literature of other ancient cultures, such as Egypt and Mesopotamia. The ancient Greeks had their ‘philosophy’ - a word that means ‘love of wisdom’. The words of Plato, Socrates, Aristotle and other philosophers became the perennial wisdom of the ages. In English culture, one could cite texts from the plays of Shakespeare that seem to contain a perennial wisdom related to human life.

Fables, fairytales and children’s stories can also be the communicators of wise words and perennial wisdom about life. The parables of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures convey a paradoxical wisdom about life and the nature of reality.

The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures is usually considered to be Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and the wisdom psalms. Catholic versions of the Bible include also the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus).

Wisdom literature exhibits an interest in instruction or pedagogy. In the Hebrew bible, this instructional or pedagogical purpose is most evident in the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The wisdom literature in the Bible provides guidance and direction to those seeking to live moral and productive lives. The wisdom literature provides a sort of textbook providing guidance on how to live, how to think, how to cope with the vicissitudes of life and how to succeed in life.