

THE WISDOM OF THE AGED

As someone with doctorates in both psychology and neurobiology, my training has taught me that in many ways it is the biology of our brain that determines our behavior. This field of study and approach to understanding behavior grew from decades of scientific research that show a strong correlation between changes in the brain's biology and changes in people's behavior. These studies are based upon changes that in some cases are those that occur naturally and in other cases, where ethically and practically possible, experimental changes in a person's biology that then caused changes in their behavior

One of the naturally occurring changes to our body's biology that effects our behavior and which I find particularly fascinating is the one that occurs as we age. It does not take a scientist with a laboratory full of equipment to see these changes; a look in the mirror will suffice. Just as so many things change to the outward appearance of our body, changes occur inside our body as well.

The biology of the brain changes dramatically as we age, whether in the early stages as a result of puberty or in the last few decades of life. These changes to our brain's biology in the latter stage of life must necessarily have their concomitant changes to our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Indeed, one of the most obvious changes is expressed in the long standing cultural tradition in just about every culture that has existed about the wisdom of the "aged-one."

An example close to home is the Native American tribe's long-held tradition of the aged Chief who may no longer be able to lead the tribe on the battlefield, but to whom the tribe turns as a person of wisdom when it is time for important decisions. In the

business community of which I was a part, venture capital, when it was time to create a board of directors for a start-up company, one seat on the board was usually reserved for a “gray-hair.”

The gray-hair is someone probably at least 60 years of age with many years of experience and success in the business segment of the start-up. Now clearly it is those years of experience in dealing with the business challenges that the start-up will have to face that is a part of the appeal of the gray-hair. However, there is much more to the story.

There may be many others who are younger who have experiences even more germane to the specific business of the start-up than does the “gray-hair.” However, the “gray-hair” person selected for the board seat is chosen perhaps even more importantly for their wisdom. It was probably no different for the tribes choosing their elder statesman.

When we arrive at the time of puberty, our hormones start to surge. Whether it is our sex drive or our desire to be a “leader of the pack,” these are the sorts of hormonally driven changes that take over our thoughts and feelings during our teenage years and beyond. Our *id* with its *instinctual* drives is in full control of our behavior. Our relationships with people come to be focused on these issues. Life becomes more stressful and agonizing as we have these new forces pushing us on to find a way to *sublimate* our *id's* desires through success in our careers and in our relationships with the opposite sex. If you ever wondered why we all look back on childhood with such fondness as a simpler and happier time, now you know, those were the years before your every waking moment was occupied with thoughts of sex and status.

The impact of these emotions upon our thoughts is profound. Pure objective analysis takes a back seat to emotional needs. Our drives for sex and status create the fog of emotions that keep us from seeing the world with Clarity, thus tainting our ability to make clean, cold, objective decisions.

The person of wisdom, usually in their sixties, seventies or even older, has seen the hormones that control the need for sex and status begin their decline. For such aged ones, in most cases decision making becomes less driven by these emotional needs, and more driven by a focus on the simple quantitative facts.

In the long run it is decisions based upon this latter type of thinking that is in everyone's best interests. How often is it that people look back on their lives, at the important decisions that turned their lives one way or another, and in the case of the ones that led them down troubled paths have come to say, "If only I had thought with my head instead of my heart?" After a certain point, the age related changes to our brain's biology make our heads dominate our hearts.

By the way, these changes are not the same for everyone. In just the same way that people's outward appearance ages in different ways, so too is this true for their internal biology as well.

My own experiences working with two of the giants of our modern world of private equity and high technology companies is described in the tool, "Decision Making and the Fog of Emotions." The one characteristic that was unique to these two men was the crystal-clear clarity of their decision making process. No emotions, feelings, remembrances of past wrongs or slights are involved. They always think with their

heads, never with their hearts: just quantitative and analytical decision making in its purest form.

Those still in the years when they are building their careers and families would be well advised to remember these examples when the time comes for a business or personal decision. With this awareness, it is also possible for you to apply this tool so you too can be wise beyond your years.