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Ricca Edmondson (2015). *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom: Meaning and Practice across the Life Course*. Bristol: Policy Press and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 224 pp. ISBN 978 1 84742 559 1 (paperback)

*Reviewed by David Blake Willis**

What is wisdom? What does it mean to our lives and how might we understand its practice as we age? Is there something special, even numinous, about ageing that confers upon us a power with deep insights into family and society? It has been a given in most cultures that becoming an elder means possessing something others who are younger do not have, a fount of experience that enables us to make judgments, model action, and practice behaviors that demonstrate intelligence, perception, and acumen. Elders are treated with special respect and listened to carefully in many societies, feted grandly on 60th, 88th, and 100th birthdays.

Yet there have been ominous developments during the 20th century which have led to discounting these traditional ideas about wisdom. This change in how older people are treated in post-modern societies has also meant a challenge to the traditional beliefs and practices of ageing conferring wisdom, special insights, and powerful judgments. As the author of this important book Ricca Edmondson has noted, we have seen how ''public discourses impoverish understanding of the last stages of life.'' The power of meaning-making, respect for the roles of those in the latter stages of life,

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and listening to our elders have been discounted by a burgeoning world population in which for many countries half of the people are under 15 years of age. In others like Japan, where the number of those over 60 is approaching one-third of the population, while experience and wisdom continue to be acknowledged, they are in fact appreciated only sporadically. This discounting of life-course meaning in a world that emphasizes individuality and privacy extends to the dominant agendas of academics.

Ageing, Insight and Wisdom is meant to remedy this deficit, at least in part. It is, in fact, a *tour de force* of life and its meanings from the perspectives of older age, a passionate and deliberately constructed journey through the landscapes of the life-course as seen from the multiple perspectives of gerontologists, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists, ethnographers, historians, authors, artists, and film-makers. Taken as a whole, the trans-disciplinary reach Edmondson brings to her book enables us to look anew at where and how wisdom and its practice has a place for us, not only for those who are elders but transgenerationally as well. The atomization of contemporary life is addressed with a subtle yet passionate call for appreciation and gratitude over the generations, beginning with that doyen of meaning-making, Viktor Frankl. The book offers a language for discussing the meaning of the life-course, a ''mapping of meaning'' that reveals the webs or networks of scholarship around ageing and wisdom, time and narrative, giving them their proper place in the world of *telos* and *logos*.

Edmondson utilizes philosophical anthropology, policy studies, sociology, spirituality, and the humanities in her ''quest for insight,'' to use Jan Baars' words. She presents us with the many ways older people are symbolically located in the world, often by and for others, but in Edmondson's approach speaking for themselves as well. Their voices come through powerfully to us in her Introduction and five chapters, preceded by an excellent Foreword by that poet of ageing and meaning H.R. ''Rick'' Moody. Her perspicacity in assembling this volume is revealed by the flow of the chapters, beginning with the roles of meaning in the life-course, followed by the ''diminishing (of) older people: silence, occlusion and 'fading out'.'' Attempting to go beyond what Moody describes as the dualities we stumble across (''structure and agency, modernity and tradition, youth and age'') and engage in an ''emancipatory discourse,'' Edmondson reports on

"lifetimes" and listening to others, noting the signal importance of languages created for life-course meaning and wisdom and concluding with a dignified look at ethics, insight, and wisdom in the ways we construct the life-course across the generations (something which can be better described as transgenerational than intergenerational, revealing movement across generations). Her work on what she calls "reconstructive ethnography" is especially interesting, reflecting Lars Tornstam's Gerotranscedence and documenting Aristotle's human flourishing. The references are extensive (26 pages) and valuable, Edmondson's principle guides having been Aristotle, Cicero, Moody and Cole, Ardelt, Bates and Staudinger, Thompson et al., Nussbaum, Baars, Birren, Macintyre, Gilleard, Baltes, Victor, Sternberg, and Woerner. Her own work, which is prolific, merits special attention.

There were some lacunae that I would have appreciated seeing addressed in the book. One of the primary authors of longitudinal studies on ageing and meaning is missing: George Vaillant and the Harvard Grant Study, perhaps the gold standard in such research. Glen Elder's research, eponymously and fortuitously named along similar lines, is discussed; yet, even with his work, I note a lack of an index entry for longitudinal research or studies. The University of Chicago Wisdom Center is not discussed, although the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on Wisdom is, so perhaps covering similar ground. I also wondered where Maslow was in the study. And most importantly from my perspective, love continues to be safely walled off, appearing in comments on Frankl, but not much beyond that. This key concept for human beings, which sociologists and philosophers have given a wide and inappropriate berth to, at least until Helen Fisher and others more recently, needs more attention. Spirituality, on the other hand, is discussed in delicate and important terms, in some of the strongest sections of the book.

Given Edmondson's marvelous background and research, which are extensive and well-reported, it is not surprising at the same time that the book and its lesson are primarily European. We do miss those countries and societies where ageing and wisdom are key demographic or cultural features, including Japan, China, India, the United States, Africa, Latin America, and particularly Aboriginals in Australia, whose wisdom traditions have much to teach us. But that was beyond the scope of the book and will be left to later scholars. A nod is made to Kalyani Mehta and her studies

in Singapore and Hong Kong, giving us a tantalizingly look at how, ''Older people themselves carry sociocultural messages for other generations.'' This cultural transmission, which informs across cultures, is well-revealed by these traditional societies and will be key to future developments in the fields of gerontology and wisdom. Appreciating perspectives on wise action that can be found ''in the transactions of everyday life,'' too, can be more important than seeking out ''wise people.'' At the same time, as she warns us, not all traditions commend themselves, notably when it comes to attitudes and values around women.

One of the most powerful aspects of Edmondson's study is the evocation and invocation of her research as grounded in a local context, that of Connemara in the West of Ireland. Her lyrical devotion to ageing and wisdom, expressed most touchingly in the custom of the Irish Wake, imbues *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom* with grace and elegance, making this a signal study of the process of ageing and the life-course, with Edmonson's nuanced wisdom leading us to a better understanding of our humanity, our spirituality, and our love for each other.