

On getting wiser (as well as older)

Trying consciousness raising techniques, an older man learns that wisdom is not merely accumulating facts. The mind, he says, needs maintenance, too.

BY MARK MILLER

You would like to think that, as you get older, you would accumulate a bit of wisdom along the way. Unless you're totally brain-dead, you probably will — just a bit. But a goodly



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amount of wisdom appears to be rather difficult to come by. I mean, I don't know a whole bunch of people I'd call really wise. Smart, maybe, but not wise. Wisdom, we may have to remind ourselves, is not a matter of accumulating lots of facts. Rather, it is a matter of coming to understand what to make of all those pieces of information — how to make sense of it all.

I tend to think that most of us live our whole lives without ever getting really "wise." We accumulate enough data, but wisdom, unfortunately, is a great deal more elusive. In our mature years this can be, if nothing else, downright embarrassing. Nobody is surprised when a twenty year old seems to lack wisdom. But at 60, when you've mostly lost the charms of youth, the lack of wisdom, to take its place, is rather a sad sight.

Well, if you have gotten "up there" in years, and have lost those fleeting qualities of youth and do not feel that you've attained a quality to take its place: a contented, amused maturity of mind (wisdom), there is something you can do about it. You can, at least, make a start by involving yourself in the process of Consciousness Raising: a deliberative process by which measurable increases of something like wisdom can be achieved, even if 20 is a distant memory. This is a programmed method by which things you've always "known," fall into place and begin to make more sense. You begin to see a larger picture. If we're successful, undergoing this experience can allow us to say, like the Greek philosopher: Eureka! I've found it!

Without wishing to make claims far too difficult to defend, I feel this happened to me fairly recently, in my own maturity. Almost immediately after my belated entry into the local organized gay community, I was invited to join a group of my gay brothers in one of these sessions. Even though the name "Consciousness Raising" sounded a bit too contrived, and even though I was clearly old enough to have

fathered (or even grandfathered) almost everybody else in the group, I went along with it. I was prepared to be amusedly tolerant from the Olympian heights of my mature years. What I was *not* prepared for, was the unaccustomed sense of wheels grinding again — those little wheels of the mind, which had largely come to a halt some time ago, suffering from a surfeit of grist. My mind was not so much storing new data as it was sorting-out, processing or making sense out of old stuff. Seeing things from a very different and far better perspective; that's what I was doing.

Oh, but it was not easy. To paraphrase Dylan Thomas, I did not "go gentle" into it; rather, I burned and raved, fought and resisted every step of the way. What could these yearlings possibly know, I thought. And, that was my first error. They didn't *know* any more than I, nor did they pretend to. They were not there as people who knew, but were there just to make better sense of things — to get to a place of better understanding of themselves and the world around them; as I should have been.

If I remember correctly, after my *first* CR, I characterized the experience as "interesting." That was as far as I would go, but it was far enough for the facilitator (Billy Russo), who kindly allowed enough time to take place before inviting me to a second CR. Again, I burned and raved, fought and resisted, and, at its conclusion, smoothing my ruffled feathers, acknowledged it to have been "stimulating." From just being "interesting" to being "stimulating," as initial reactions, indicated definite progression. But after the second CR, I made the second error — thinking that the process was finished. It was not. And it still is not finished. The stimulation I felt after the second CR was a long-lasting effect, lasting even to this day. CR has a beginning, but no end. For what happens is that the mind gets turned on, never again to be turned off. A process begins which will never be finished.

Today, I am not just years older; I am, I feel, a hell of a lot wiser as a result. I feel that I have become more aware, more conscious of the meaning of things, and seeing more clearly how things fit together. Today, I am looking forward to another CR, which we've been talking about down here in Roseburg. We have a few newcomers to the community who have expressed a willingness to participate, and what I have said in this column is meant particularly for them — to encourage them to expose their minds, intellects and hearts to the possibilities that exist. Come in, "burn and rave, fight and resist" if you must, but do come in. The water's great!

And to all those who've never experienced CR, who perhaps think they are a bit juvenile or passe; all I can say is: Try it. Look at it this way. A mind is so much more than a dust bin for collecting facts. It's a machine which needs fueling and oiling from time to time. It needs to move. If nothing else, the experience will flex your mind and that, by itself, is sufficient gain. I'd be willing to bet you'll gain much more than that.

Mark Miller is a long time member of GALA's Switchboard Committee. Besides peer counseling, Miller hosts Switchboard Theater, a GALA fundraiser where people come together to watch and discuss movies relevant to our lifestyles. He is the chairperson of MCC-Roseburg's Board of Directors. And he is active in the weekly rap group at the Methodist church.

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