

# The Narrative Pursuit of Relational Wisdom

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Résumé de l'article

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**SPECIAL ISSUE:  
NARRATIVE AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL  
TRANSFORMATION**

**The Narrative Pursuit of Relational Wisdom**

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Since the time of Aristotle, wisdom has played a key role in our attempt to understand the positive nature of human behavior. In the past decade, professionals in psychology and related fields have expanded their interest in the empirical and theoretical pursuit of wisdom. The relational dimension of wisdom and its narrative ecology have received less attention. This article integrates previous work on storied approaches to positive functioning in committed partnerships and proposes relational wisdom to be a master virtue of relationship development, one that can be cultivated across the lifespan of the partnership. The aspects of relational wisdom, such as self-reflection, attunement to self and other, the balance of conflicting partner aims, the interpretation of rules and principles in light of the uniqueness of each situation, and the capacity to learn from experience are identified and explored through the analysis of couple stories. Wisdom is seen to evolve through dialogue, and the resulting stories can serve as touchstones to what is most precious and vital in the relationship as well as guides for action through challenges and conflict

**Keywords:**

*relational wisdom, partner dialogue, couples, joint narratives, positive functioning*

*Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when he is young nor weary in the search of it when he has grown old. For no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul.*

Epicurus (341-270 BC)

We are witnessing a surge of interest in the phenomenon of wisdom, long seen as the pinnacle of human development and the means and end to living the good life. Wisdom, defined generally as a deep, experience-based knowledge that is non-self centered (Skerrett, 2022), is a complex phenomenon. Relatively

rare, it depends on a willingness and motivation to learn from experience and a desire to understand life in all of its complexity (Ardelt et al., 2019). In their recent call for an integrative model of wisdom, Glück and Weststrate (2022) reference the ancient tale of the blind man and the elephant to describe the current state of the field, in which various researchers have focused on the part of the animal they are most familiar with.

In psychology, wisdom research is reflected in the shift from pathology-driven paradigms to strength-based approaches. Qualities such as honesty, courage, generosity, forgiveness, and other character strengths have not only a growing research base but also the subspecialty of positive psychology developed to advance the understanding of these concepts (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Perhaps spurred by the unprecedented array of global challenges that require complex and balanced solutions (Grossmann & Brienza, 2018; Sternberg & Glück, 2019) and inundated by stories of the unraveling of domestic life and extreme political divisiveness, the pursuit of wisdom by those in the field of psychology has never been more timely.

Aristotle considered wisdom, often thought of as an abstract, ethereal term, to be the most practical of values. He believed that our social practices constantly demand choices, such as how to be fair, how to take risks, and how to determine a course of action. Making the best choice requires wisdom, and wisdom requires balancing individual needs with those of the community (Skerrett, 2016). A rich literature is evolving dedicated to uncovering growth-promoting, life-affirming processes and identifying qualities that may be exclusive to the couple relationship (Skerrett & Fergus, 2015). I propose that wisdom, typically portrayed as a solitary endeavor, is co-created in dialogue. Such a delicate balancing of individual and collective needs is continually present in the context of relational life, leading to my view that committed partnerships can be seen as a wisdom environment (Skerrett, 2022), home to the greatest ongoing potential for destructive as well as life-affirming dialogues. The examination of partner dialogues appears to be underappreciated yet fertile ground on which to expand our understanding of the co-creation of relational wisdom.

This article briefly integrates previous work on positive functioning in committed partners and examines the potential of joint narratives to expose relational wisdom. Using relevant narratives from the Couple Story Project, relational wisdom is broadly defined as the ability to connect individual concerns to relational consequences, approach life challenges from a team, or “we,” perspective, and hold a larger purpose for and beyond the relationship. It is

proposed as a master, albeit optional, virtue of relationship functioning, one embedded in transformational growth and change.

### **Storying Relational Life**

Just as individual narratives of “self-defining memories” are integral to one’s experience of selfhood (Singer & Salovey, 1993), the story of the couple is essential to the identity of the relationship. (See also the related notion of relationship-defining memories by Alea and Vick [2010], accounts of how couples met or first recognized the potential for lasting love.) The question of how couples narrate the experience of their relationship originated in a study of couple adjustment in the face of a breast cancer diagnosis (Skerrett, 1998; Skerrett, 2003). Key findings pointed to the importance of a team attitude in defining resilient outcomes. The ability to think and act with the best interests of the relationship in mind made such a compelling difference in both partners’ ability to cope that it launched a series of studies aimed to unpack the components of this team mindset, or “we-ness.”

These studies on storytelling in nonclinical and clinical committed partnerships, which came to be known as the Couple Story Project, explored ways that couples developed positive, life-affirming relationship stories, particularly narratives that reflected the essence of their partnership. The studies have been described elsewhere (Skerrett, 2022; Singer & Skerrett, 2014; Skerrett, 2013). Briefly, the early studies focused on successful couples who reported high satisfaction with their relationships. They were primarily White, Western European, with some college education, in first marriages from thirty to forty-three years long. They offered more experience with storying, having had time to develop their shared narratives. Later work on the Couple Story Project added African American, Indian, Asian, and partnered (married and unmarried) LGBTQ+ pairs. In-depth joint interviews as well as utilizing various instruments tapped into additional dimensions of the relationship.

The we-oriented memories of study couples shared several common features: a conscious interpretation of life experiences that described how one got from point A to point B, an internal coherence, an overall theme of resilience or redemptive recasting of negative events into having positive meaning, and a lesson or understanding about the value of the couple’s relationship and perhaps relationships in general. Effective We Stories combined these features into compelling and persuasive narratives that were memorable, maintained a storytelling vitality, and offered a clear lesson about the value of mutuality (Singer

& Skerrett, 2014). This research shaped my conviction that meaningful couple stories are the most powerful way to cultivate a “we consciousness” and to maintain the positive focus needed to build a vital, sustainable relationship.

### Couple Stories and We Stories

Each individual in a committed relationship holds an idea of a couple story he or she believes is shared. Simply put, a couple story is one that the two members of a couple jointly tell about their experiences in their relationship. Elements of a couple story reveal unique and infinite variability in their tone, themes, and structured patterns. Couple stories can be about the first date, events in the courtship, a favorite activity, a bad fight, the birth of a child, or expectations about the future. A couple story reflects the joint narrative of the couple’s connection or lack thereof to each other. The narrative may be agreed upon or disputed, but it still represents the record of what each presents about their shared lives as opposed to stories of their individual experiences before the relationship. Rico is a sixty-four-year-old semiretired electrician, married to Ellie for thirty-seven years. They are the parents of four adult children.

**RICO:** *I thought I’d have more time once the kids left the house, you know, to do those things you always think you’re gonna do? I got a million projects around the house I’d like to get to, the wife and I said we’d travel, have some fun; I don’t know where my days go. I still work Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, which is plenty, but you’d think I could get more of what I want done. The kids are always calling us about one thing or another. I like having them close, but sometimes I’d like a break. I know I’m more tired than I used to be. The days I’m off, I usually take a nap; then we’re in bed before ten most nights. The wife’s always on me about going in for a checkup because we got lots of heart issues in my family.*

**ELLIE:** *I was always so busy with taking care of the kids, working some years; I didn’t give our marriage much thought. But now that we have more time, I guess I figured it would feel different than it does. He kinda does his own thing and doesn’t seem much interested in going places, which really bugs me some days. I say, if we don’t do it now, when will we?*

Rico and Ellie's couple story has the flavor of two swimmers in parallel lanes, heading toward the same destination with little heed to the other's position or pace in the pool. Neither doubts the other's commitment. Both have a vague awareness of being in a life transition, but neither expresses a vision of how their life might shift. This couple story is not a We Story.

A We Story is a particular type of couple story that reflects a mutual identity that couples describe as the lived experience of their relationship accumulated over time and events. It affirms the commitment and mutual caring that are the bedrock of a strong relationship. We Stories provide a couple with a storyline that prioritizes their union and helps them act in ways that benefit the team rather than either individual. In our research, we typically ask for a We Story in the following way: "Write an account of an event in your relationship that serves as a reminder of your love and commitment to each other and your relationship. Write the story together."

We Stories can be solicited in response to the directive above; told in bits and pieces by alternating partners over time; or inferred, interpreted, and understood from the deep listening that typically occurs in a therapeutic space. In evaluating a We Story, we pay particular attention to several qualities: Is the narrative tone positive, with positive changes in affect? Is the theme humanistic, demonstrating specific value orientation? Is the structure complex and coherent?

Here is a We Story shared by Beth and Jake, married for twelve years:

**BETH:** *You might think this is an odd story to be positive, but it was really a bad news/good news kind of thing. My mom was very sick, getting chemo, and I was with her a lot.*

**JAKE:** *Yeah, she and I were like ships passing in the night. I went to work, came home, picked up the kids from school, threw food together, did pretty much everything until she came home.*

**BETH:** *And I'd come home exhausted, grumpy, and completely spent. I had zero energy for his feelings, news about the kids, or basically anything outside of myself. Nobody could find anything in the house, and this went on for months! I was starting to get worried about our marriage, but honestly, I didn't have the bandwidth to do anything about it.*

**JAKE:** *Yeah, I was getting pretty pissed, but I didn't want to put any more pressure on her.*

**BETH:** *One day, I came home from cleaning my mom's place, barely able to keep my head up, and when I walked in, he had sent the kids next door, set up a little table for two, and had ordered in my favorite meal. He was playing the song that was on the radio during our first date, and he had even stuck a daisy in a Coke can and set it on the table. I just started crying because it made me remember why I married him. He's always had this amazing ability to come through when I least expect it and most need it. We turned a corner that night. I started making more time for us and the family, and found that it really refocused me. I got my sense of humor back.*

**JAKE:** *Thank God. And we really started taking care of each other again.*

### **The Elements of We Stories: SERAPHS**

What makes Beth and Jake's story qualify as a We Story is the presence of particular elements we identified as security, empathy, respect, acceptance, pleasure, humor, and shared meaning and vision, composing the anagram SERAPHS (Singer & Skerrett, 2014). Not every We Story has to have every one of the seven elements, but there should be at least three to qualify (Singer & Skerrett, 2014).

Here are the SERAPHS in Beth and Jake's story. It begins with their facing a crisis with Beth's mother's illness. Beth was preoccupied, and she and Jake had become quite disconnected. Even in crisis, there was a flavor of security, as neither doubted the commitment of the other, and while they weren't happy with the state of their relationship, there wasn't a sense that they were ready to end it. As the story shifted toward its clearly redemptive ending, the other elements of We Stories came to the foreground. Jake's empathy and respect for Beth's stress and style of coping, the mutual awareness and acceptance of how each of them felt more vulnerable, and Jake's knowledge of what Beth most needed and what actions he could take that she might be most responsive to all shone a light on their dynamic of loyalty and patience during adversity. Jake's ability to tap into all of these relationship resources, and Beth's ability to be open to his thoughtful gestures and humor, turned the tide. Beth's ensuing delight reflected the way their shared vision

of the relationship brought them back to one another. Note how the couple touched all of the points of the SERAPHS.

Many We Stories provide an important image, metaphor, or phrase that serves as a touchstone for the relationship and embodies the love and commitment each partner feels for the other. It serves as a kind of shorthand or placeholder for a more elaborate psychological or relationship concern, or both. The image is not only used to remind each other about the defining elements of who they are together but is a way to broadcast to others outside the relationship something essential about their connection. Jake and Beth's table for two with a daisy in a Coke can is an image that stands for the loving care at the heart of their relationship and served to reorient them to that loving connection.

We will now look at each of the SERAPHS in turn. Security involves a willingness by both partners to acknowledge the primacy of their relationship in their lives. This is the dream most couples have on their wedding day, before life gets more complicated. It reflects the point of it all, the reason partners become a couple. As one woman described it, security is "believing he's got my back—no matter what." This SERAPHS turned out to be the most common in our latest study of the co-constructed We Stories of couples who identified themselves as "happy" (Gildersleeve et al., 2017).

Empathy and respect are the next elements that take hold when each partner feels that his or her own feelings are being acknowledged and respected. Empathy is part of the emotional glue that helps bind partners together. It requires enough calm and receptivity to allow for attunement. It is important to clarify that genuine empathy occurs in the context of self-care and self-respect, not when a partner submerges his or her own identity or sense of autonomy. It comes from an appreciation of the partner's individuality, and the respect is grounded in that context. Respect is also about valuing the other for the particular positive attributes the partner brings to the relationship and shared life together. Respect is the quality most connected to a sense of pride about one's partner, a "how lucky am I to be with you" feeling. When both partners feel this level of respect, there is a mutual equality and shared gratitude that guides the relationship.

Acceptance, another SERAPHS, is often experienced as a tall order by couples because it is the ultimate acknowledgment of the imperfections and vulnerabilities each brings to the relationship. I have called this "mutual engagement in supported vulnerability," and it reflects the willingness of each to stand before the other, flaws and all, and know that he or she is good enough (Singer & Skerrett, 2014).



Pleasure and humor are qualities cited by many couples as can't-live-withouts. Whether it is the small, daily gestures of kindness that bring a smile to one's partner's face or the sensual and erotic joys of connection, cultivating pleasure keeps couples focused on their relationship as a source of enjoyment rather than frustration. As one man put it: "Even though she can finish the punch line of my jokes, I love that she still laughs and lets me have my moment." Pleasure emerged as the second-most common feature of the We Stories in the "happy couples" study cited above.

Finally, shared meaning gets to the very heart of the "we." Partners who have truly grasped the "we" understand that they are engaged in a lifelong project that they are co-creating together. They see this project as both unique and larger than themselves. This represents a kind of vision for what they want their partnership to be. It can be reimagined on a regular basis.

The following We Story comes from a couple in their mid-forties who were adding an adopted son to their newly committed relationship. James and Allen's We Story reflects both the individual and the couple challenges at the core of this transition:

**JAMES:** *Our story comes from the time we were in the thick of things—exhausted, depleted, and second-guessing ourselves left and right. One morning, we were both in the kitchen, draped over Kevin's highchair, desperately trying to get him to eat. He probably felt our anxiety because he was crabbier than usual. We had two jars of baby food, each different flavors, and we kept taking turns trying to stuff some in his mouth.*

*He wasn't having it, and then we started to argue. At one point, the jars spilled and the contents mushed together. One of us just stuck a spoon in the mess, fed it to Kevin, and—big shock—he ate it! It looked so gross, but he had a huge smile on his face as this horrible color dripped off his chin. We both cracked up. We decided it was the perfect image for us. Two separate jars, very different, but when put together make something we couldn't have imagined and way better than each alone.*

**ALLEN:** *The catalyst to our realizing this was our beautiful boy, who brought plenty of stress, turned us both upside down and inside out, but helped us build something completely amazing*

*and wonderful. Now, even though Kevin is eating solids, we keep two jars of baby food around to stand for that moment of awareness. All we have to do when life gets rough is look up on the kitchen shelf at the jars.*

James and Allen's We Story features many SERAPHS, most notably plenty of humor. While honestly admitting their problems as parents, they clearly took much pleasure in Kevin, which must have defused many a tense moment. They had already crafted a vision for their marriage that included parenthood, which paved the way to deepen the meaning and purpose in their lives. They were navigating all the uncertainty of new parenting with thoughtful reflection, openness to the unknown, and a strong dose of mutual empathy—all building blocks to cultivating a wise foundation for their future.

### **The Wisdom of We Stories**

The value of We Stories addresses Glück and Weststrate's question (2022) about the translational impact of wisdom: Why and where do we need it most in everyday life? What purpose does the wisdom found in We Stories serve in relationships? One is that it shapes a couple's mutual identity, addressing the question: Who are we? Partners often narrate microstories or brief episodes, such as their wedding day, when their first child went off to school, the death of a parent, or moving into a new house. Or they narrate a macrostory, the big picture that takes in a sweeping portrayal rather than specific episodes. Taken as a whole, the macrostory conveys the defining features of who they believe themselves to be and may express unique rituals, customs, division of labor, and shared or conflicting values.

A second purpose of a We Story is to help a couple make sense of the complexities of their experiences and to find a sense of meaning and purpose. Understanding where we have been, where we are, and where we are going is one of the most human and critical tasks we face. This understanding is a key aspect in the resilience of couples and a strong contributor to a host of measures of satisfaction and well-being (Skerrett & Fergus, 2015).

A third purpose is to provide guidelines for engagement. This is the how-to, or rule book of sorts, for the boundaries of the relationship. The parameters for connection and disconnection, and for what works and what doesn't, are critical to a wise relationship. Surprise reminders of their loving connection work for Beth and Jake, but it might not for couples who don't like to be caught off guard and

prefer knowing what to expect, especially at stressful times. Such a playbook can also be a vehicle for change and growth in the relationship.

Finally, We Stories are a repository for the wisdom of the couple. I view the development and cultivation of a “we” perspective as the epitome of relationship wisdom, a master virtue of sorts, and related to the other virtues of knowledge, curiosity, generosity, gratitude, and compassion. Wisdom is built through developing insights and skills, as in the story of Beth and Jake, and is cultivated across the life span of a partnership.

In their thorough review of the existing wisdom literature, Glück and Weststrate (2022) propose an integrative model to guide future work. Conceptions and methodological approaches have evolved over thirty years of rigorous empirical inquiry wisdom, and definitions vary considerably. They range from wisdom as expert knowledge to wisdom as interconnectedness, from wisdom as personality to wisdom as learning from life. Primary components of wisdom have been conceptualized as cognitive (knowledge, metacognitive capacities, self-reflection) and noncognitive (exploratory orientation, concern for others, emotional regulation). Glück and Weststrate (2022) determined that in challenging real-life situations, noncognitive wisdom components moderate the effects of the cognitive. They concluded that the different measures of wisdom are compatible and complementary rather than contradictory. All facets come together in real-life manifestations of wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), the Three-Dimensional Wisdom Model (Ardelt, 2003), the Bremen Wisdom Paradigm (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008), and the MORE Life Experience Model (Glück & Bluck, 2013). As suggested by the narratives of our couples deemed to be wise, both cognitive and noncognitive dimensions were required for wise action in real life. Of further significance is the overlap of both cognitive and noncognitive wisdom components to the SERAPHS elements of our couple We Stories.

### **Pathways to Wisdom**

Bauer (2021) describes the ways cognitive and noncognitive components interweave to create wise stories. In his discussion of the transformational processes of growth and change, he suggests that the path to wisdom involves a willingness to take new perspectives, while the path to love and happiness involves personally meaningful reflections and activities. In other words, growth involves deepened experience as well as a deepened understanding. In order to have both, one must proceed down both paths. Stories that emphasize reflective growth seem to help cultivate psychosocial wisdom, while stories that emphasize

experiential growth cultivate wise behavior (Bauer, 2021). Collaborative narratives such as those co-created by our couples facilitate development (Pasupathi et al., 2006; Pasupathi et al., 2007). Nothing gives us perspective like our capacity to reflect on our behaviors in relation to another person. Betty and Stan's We Story illustrates this beautifully.

**BETTY:** *I've always loved to dance. Stan is a terrible dancer. Over the years, I've tried everything: shaming him, dragging him to dance classes, refusing to dance with him. I actually used to say to his face, "You stink, you have no rhythm, you are hopeless." Can you believe that? Now I wonder how I could have been so cruel. These days, I'm grateful that he still wants to dance with me, that he tries, and I don't care how we look when we get on the dance floor at weddings. I realize he asks me because he knows how much it means to me to dance, and for that I'm very grateful.*

**STAN:** *You're right about that, honey. I'm just glad you understand my good intentions and overlook my lack of skill!*

The following stories were chosen as exemplars of transformational relationships, reflected by partner efforts to balance growth in well-being, care, and wisdom within the contexts of their lives.

Marilyn and Bill were a couple in their mid-fifties, married for twenty-six years, and the parents of four young adults. Bill had a busy career as a family practice physician, and Marilyn had been in and out of the retail sales force. They weathered an early, brief infidelity, juvenile diabetes in one of their children, anxiety disorders in another, Marilyn's job changes, the dementia of Bill's father, and "more than our share of financial struggles." Here is their description of how they transformed their challenges into a "we consciousness" and, ultimately, a wise ecology for their marriage:

**BILL:** *We started out very much in love and very much wanting a successful marriage. Of course, who doesn't; nobody starts out wanting to make a mess of things.*

**MARILYN:** *Right, and you honestly never know how it'll go till life holds your hand to the fire.*

**BILL:** *You also think you know someone, and I guess you do as much as you can at first. You can't really know how someone's gonna change till you get into it.*

**MARILYN:** *Maybe the stuff that hits you the hardest is the stuff you never, ever expect. Like Bill's affair. I never thought he had it in him. My girlfriends said at the time, "Yeah, that's what every woman thinks." I couldn't reconcile the betrayal with who I believed he was or the fact that I still loved him. The best thing I did at the time was nothing. Even though a part of me wanted to run away fast, another part wanted to stay. We had a three-year-old and one-year-old twins, and like I said, I loved him. I forced myself to listen to him and to try to be open to this new side of him he was sharing.*

**BILL:** *I will forever be grateful she did because I loved her and never stopped. I missed her; she was consumed with the kids and I was working a lot. I felt lonely. No excuse, but the one-night stand didn't mean anything to me. I was so into myself and my own pity party that I never thought about the consequences. I should say that it didn't mean the same thing to me that it did to her. I had to open up to her, let her see these parts I wasn't very proud of about myself, like my arrogance. I'd never been so brutally honest, and I was positive she'd leave me when she heard the truth.*

**MARILYN:** *We both had to be willing to hang out in the gray space of the unknown for what felt like forever. I had to be willing to keep listening to a story I didn't like and wanted to change for the better, but I learned you can't rush stuff like this. It took a lot of talking before I was able to acknowledge the good between us. I had to weigh if one night of bad judgment counted for more than all the good. Even though I didn't agree with his version that I'd abandoned him for the kids, I finally understood that that was how he interpreted that particular time in our life and that to keep judging his feelings wasn't getting us anywhere.*

**BILL:** *We ultimately decided that Marilyn could forgive but we wouldn't forget. We decided to figure out better ways to cope with all the demands and learned to prioritize our relationship. We went to counseling, started reading books and making more time for each other no matter what. Now, so many years later, we use what we learned then to remember that we've gone through very tough times, and we'll get through each one stronger every time. As long as we're willing to stay open to learn and remember the love, we'll be okay.*

Theirs is a lengthy story and one filled with a vivid blend of both SERAPHS and wisdom resources. With less emotional regulation and empathy, Marilyn might have allowed her initial rage to propel her out the door. Bill's willingness to risk, self-disclose, and take accountability in the face of an uncertain outcome, and Marilyn's willingness to ride the emotional roller coaster while listening to Bill's story, paved the way to a new story of transformation and growth. Such a mutual openness to reflect, pause, and then pause again while considering the impact of new understandings shaped the momentum for change. The very security of their relationship met an early threat, and the story they ultimately crafted provided the ingredients for a wise tool kit that they used for many years after.

They emerged from their early challenge with a stronger orientation toward and practice in balancing their own needs with that of the other, all in the service of the greater good of the relationship. They described that when their son was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes at age seven, they knew they couldn't immediately write their positive ending but needed to keep their stories open to learning what each shift in their son's health asked of their relationship. They knew they needed to regularly check in with each other to rebalance the tendency to become absorbed in the needs of their son to the neglect of their own. They actively brought the wisdom gleaned from each challenge to the next one, strengthening their confidence and commitment with each cycle. Their evolving story reflected a joint appreciation that the precious beauty of their relationship was inseparable from its fragility. Such is the prototype for both growth and wisdom. Their story exemplifies Bauer's definition of wisdom as one that conveys a narrator's ability to think deeply about what matters most; wisdom is "what works" (2021). Their story also shows complexity and coherence, and reflects their joint humanity.

Another wise story is that of Marge and Rick, both in their early fifties. They described their process in the following way, which culminated in a rich We Story:

**RICK:** *It probably helps that we're pretty thoughtful people. Plus, we'd both been married before and didn't want to repeat the same mistakes this time around. We had a bunch of conversations where we talked about what had gone wrong in our other marriages; maybe not the best start, but it helped us think through what mattered most to us now. We agreed that we really valued a sense of humor, being able to laugh at ourselves and be vulnerable. We want the kind of marriage where we're not afraid of change, but if we are afraid, we talk about it. We also want to communicate about things as they happen and not stuff them in or hold on to them. We want to treat each other with kindness. We want a "feel-good" marriage, where we can count on feeling better around each other than around anyone else.*

**MARGE:** *We both had to work at figuring out how to be partners who could do that with each other. For example, I'm not a naturally funny person, so I'm learning how to lighten up and find the humor in a situation. That comes easy to Rick, but he has to pay attention to staying present and not stuff his feelings, and to stop keeping score. The more little successes we have, the easier it is to imagine more change. I'm encouraged whenever I see Rick think first before he offers a solution to a problem I haven't asked him to solve. And I feel good when I see that he's proud of himself for doing that. We have a big fuzzy throw in our bedroom that isn't much to look at but feels great. We decided that it's the symbol for our marriage. Just looking at it helps us remember the vision of who we want to be.*

Relational wisdom emerges most clearly in the face of difficult, complex, and uncertain situations that pose moral dilemmas. Kate and Jerry, facing an untimely cancer diagnosis, described the impact of the event on their ability to create meaning:

**KATE:** *I just kept thinking there was a mistake. I was twenty-nine; I didn't think someone at my age, with no family history, could get breast cancer. I went through a phase of feeling guilty about ignoring the lump I'd found in the shower. I didn't think it could be anything, and then I'd get busy and forget about it.*

**JERRY:** *Once she told me, I was all over her to get it looked at. I told her stories about a guy at work whose girlfriend had breast cancer; I threatened to make the appointment myself.*

**KATE:** *Now I know I was really scared and just didn't want to face the possibility that something could be wrong.*

**JERRY:** *Then, when she did get diagnosed and it was really bad, I blamed her for not going soon enough, and I blamed myself for not pushing harder.*

**KATE:** *It was a very bad time for us. We worked together to do what needed doing but somehow couldn't find a way to connect like we used to. I was totally focused on myself and my fears. For the first time since we'd been together, we went through periods where we just coexisted. Jerry would be too sad to reach out, and I couldn't listen to one more depressing thing. I was okay as long as he found the energy to come to my oncology appointments. At least he could take notes, because I had no memory.*

Gradually, Jerry and Kate learned to downgrade their expectations of themselves and each other, and aimed for the “least input with the best return.” Their goal was to connect when they could and be compassionate when they couldn't. The stories they had built over the course of their partnership became incoherent in the face of all the chaotic stress. Their theme of success and accomplishment was dealt a major blow, and their future was threatened. The unimaginable became real, and they “didn't know which pieces of the story to pick up and follow.” Both were floundering and in need of new stories for themselves and for their partnership. As Kate said, “We also lost track of whose feelings were whose. It felt like we were just a blob of sadness and didn't know how to help each other.”

Jerry's mother died while Kate was still undergoing treatment. The key story challenge they faced was reflected in the different meanings each crafted for the multiple stressors. Kate's initial shock and retreat clashed with Jerry's fighter approach. As Kate's treatment progressed, it became harder for Jerry to hold on to his optimism, and Kate read that as a loss of hope or that he no longer cared about her well-being.



**JERRY:** *I really suffered with what I saw as Kate's lack of reaction to my mother's death. I knew they were close and that she loved her, so I had to keep telling myself it was the cancer, that both of these things were just too much for her. It was a subtle accommodation in his story but one that reflected a broader understanding and compassion for Kate, even in the face of his own grief. This, as well as other accommodations, helped them keep their couple story open:*

**KATE:** *The hardest part of coping with everything was hanging out in the unknown. I wanted an ending; I wanted to know how we were going to come out the other side. I didn't like hearing that it would take a while to have enough distance to make sense of all this. Eventually, I could sense some shifts, which gave me hope. For example, I stopped measuring us against some progress chart—were we still in the anger stage or in the acceptance stage? That was not realistic or useful. I stopped asking, why us? We both indulged in that, and it didn't help. Now we're more into, okay, this nightmare happened, what is the best we can do with it?*

Here Kate narrated the first of what would be multiple completed storylines, brief stories that had a beginning, middle, and an end. It is a sign of a transformational story; she was putting some distance between what happened before and what was happening now. The greater the distance, the easier to extract meaning and integrate into the larger flow of life experience. She also started using more positive language: “What is the best we can make of it?” The forward momentum gave them both a sense of progress, hope, and fostered more resilient stories.

The following We Story frames this transformation. Filled with meaning, respect, and empathy, it shines a light on their new chapter:

**KATE:** *We decided that we had actually been lucky. Yes, two horrible things happened to us, but before that, our lives were pretty darn great. We didn't have much practice dealing with tragedy—luckily. At some point, we agreed that this was something that could upend our relationship. We could bury our heads in our own pain and forget about each other. We decided we wanted to use these tragedies to get stronger and love each*

*other even more. Now when something comes up, we ask, what's the best thing we can do now? What can we give to each other that will help? We don't always have an answer right then, but at least we have a purpose, and that keeps us united.*

Getting on the same page story-wise when tragedy strikes is no easy feat. Wisdom manifests itself in situations that are important, difficult, uncertain, and emotionally challenging. Neither cognitive nor personality components of wisdom alone are sufficient to understand real-life wisdom (Glück, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The couple stories profiled here suggest varying degrees of wisdom. As proposed by the integrative wisdom model, each story portrays different combinations of the head and heart dimensions of wisdom, and we would predict differential capacities to behave in wise ways. The stories reflect Randall and McKim's description of wisdom (2008) as a deepened reading of one's story.

The narratives illustrate wisdom through couples' desires to more deeply understand one another's stories while being aware of the limitations and subjective nature of that knowledge. The couples tended to see disagreements as inevitable and were curious and wanted to learn more about one another. They could take the long view and look at issues from multiple perspectives while making efforts to be compassionate in the face of differences. They shared core values and strove for a balance between individual and joint pursuits. They tended to tell coherent stories filled with higher levels of meaning and stronger themes of growth. They viewed their relationship as their greatest asset. Perhaps their most defining characteristic was that they didn't expect this of themselves or each other all the time; they could make room for imperfection.

Wisdom happens through the interaction between fundamental life challenges and the personal and relationship resources brought to bear in facing them. Clearly, wisdom isn't confined to any particular time in the life cycle but is more associated with later adulthood simply because we have accumulated more experiences by that point (Skerrett, 2022). Our couples faced many fundamental life events that were distinctive, carried a strong emotional impact, and were understood as influential. As Rohrbaugh (2021) suggests, collectivist coping most akin to our concept of we-ness, in which partners define challenges as shared, holds the most potential to enhance the overall relationship.

What truly distinguished our couples was that they came to view their relationship as the biggest resource they had in facing those experiences. The qualities of their unique bond, such as humor, friendship, loyalty, and respect, were understood as emerging from their mutuality, not from an individual trait of either partner. Each was born into something new by virtue of their relationship.

Important aspects in the pursuit of relational wisdom among couples, such as culture, age, gender, and individual differences in partner resources, require further scrutiny. By profiling the potential of a narrative perspective, it is hoped that other investigators will continue to deepen the discourse.

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