

Practical wisdom

Experience, Human Nature



First Book Review Schwartz, B. , & Sharpe, K. (2010). Practical Wisdom: The Right Way To Do The Right Thing. Riverhead Books. New York. Summary Schwartz and Sharpe present an interesting array of examples of how there has been a demoralisation of the medical, legal, educational and financial institutions. Where efficiency, accountability and profits become the driving force of organisations, the authors argue this causes a corruption and demoralisation of practitioners where they become discouraged from getting the balance right.

The authors suggest we take refuge in rules however the rules keep us from understanding what we are doing. They share how some conscientious professionals who no longer find it possible to practice their profession following the rules and incentives set, have practically applied their knowledge to facilitate a more humane way of practicing which the authors label as practical wisdom. Review The authors refer to what Aristotle named “ phronesis” (practical wisdom) which is obtained through learning from experience and applying to new situations. Rules and incentives, sticks and carrots” will not create wisdom. Finding practical ways to apply contextualised knowledge takes courage to question conventional thinking or practices. Practical wisdom as highlighted by the authors is like an antidote to both rules and incentives: it appeals to good judgement and responsibility. This cannot be taught but gained through experiences where these experiences increase awareness and promote critical thinking: encouraging one to examine and assess for themselves “ the right way to do the right thing. In the book an example is given whereby a cleaner was accused of not cleaning the hospital room by a patient’s father even though he had done so.

The cleaner chose to not engage in an argument and exercised wisdom about the consequences of holding onto his “rights” and he just went and re-cleaned the room. Knowing when to exercise this wisdom is at the heart of what the author’s discuss. The author’s encourage you to self-reflect and think more consciously about what you do.

Reading some of the examples in this book where practical wisdom was exercised, reminded me of something I once heard: “in any situation you can choose to be right or kind”. This comment had a visceral impact on me and gratefully comes to mind at times where I am reminded about the way in which I can choose to act in a given situation. I believe this is what the authors are encouraging. I did not learn anything new from this book but it was a great reminder of wanting to be a ‘good person’ in all relationships and encounters and encouraged me to be more mindful of my choices and the impact of my actions.