

THE
WEATHER OF THE MIND
Wisdom Curriculum
Book One



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“And it never failed that during the dry years
the people forgot about the rich years,
and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years.”
– John Steinbeck, East of Eden

“By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience,
which is the bitterest.”
- Confucius

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Introduction

I propose that *wisdom* ought to be a course of life-long study for us all. Wisdom ought to be a subject for exploration and discussion in our families, in our relationships, in our neighborhoods, and in our schools.

The Weather of the Mind is the first book in the Urbanmonks Wisdom Curriculum. This book focuses on creating simple daily rituals for observing and understanding the ‘weather of our own minds.’

I have been researching emotional health and culture for a dozen years and I have realized that the topic of our emotional health is somewhat challenging to write about. For we are not a culture that likes to go deep and explore the nature of our lives. However, it seems that each year, more and more of us realize that we must go deeper. We realize that we must understand our emotional selves in order to build a healthy life. We are beginning to see emotional health in a way that is similar to physical health. Just like we need to eat well and exercise to build healthy muscles and bones, we must learn to listen to and understand our emotions to build healthy minds.

For many of us, understanding our emotions is no longer a luxury, no longer a choice we have; many of us have been forced to retreat. Many of us have, at some point in our lives, hit the wall, emotionally. And these wall-hitting episodes are the most defining moments of our lives. These are the great crossroads of our emotional lives. At these junctures we face a critical choice: to distract or to learn.

In this book, I introduce the wisdom curriculum, explain my methods for studying wisdom, and then share a simple yet potent ritual for identifying and understanding the weather of our minds and for building strategies for our response. In the same way that hearing a weather report for afternoon thundershowers can help us plan properly, learning about the weather of our minds is particularly valuable when we must deal with the inevitable rough storms of our lives.

We use measuring devices – thermometers, speedometers, and clocks – everyday and these help us understand the situation and allow us to respond quickly and effectively. And yet, we have developed no gauges for rapidly assessing our emotional health. Imagine if our fire department did not have a method for rapidly assessing a fire. Imagine they didn't have a practiced response for each challenge they faced. Imagine if every time there was a fire they spent a half hour trying to understand what was going on and then another half hour making a game plan for how to respond. That would be insane. Yet, this is how we approach our emotional challenges. Most of us don't have a great sense of how to assess our internal challenges, our internal fires, and when we try to figure out a strategy from within the fire we are often not seeing things clearly.

The Weather of the Mind is intended to help us more readily assess our emotional state and to have a basic plan of how to respond when the challenges are greatest.

How I Study Wisdom

I began to study wisdom in search of a solution, a solution to the high levels of anxiety, depression, and addiction in our culture. I began to search out wisdom in individuals, wisdom in families, wisdom in schools, wisdom in nature, wisdom in neighborhoods. I searched for wisdom in foresight, in sound planning and design, and wisdom in reaction and response.

The wisdom of our minds is related to the wisdom of places. But what is a wise mind? What is a wise workplace or a wise home? What are the elements of the physical design and social design that can foster wisdom? How do we engender wisdom in our schools and homes? If a wise person is an emotionally healthy person, how do we raise wise, emotionally healthy people?

The first thing I found out is that in studying wisdom we must, first of all, know ourselves. We must know how we interact with different settings. Wisdom is an amazing field of study because one can study wisdom anytime, anywhere: while waiting in line at the grocery store, while out to dinner with friends, while cutting up potatoes and onions. The study of wisdom has already begun in our lives, for we all yearn for a level of peace of mind, peace in relationships. Now to figure out a way to prioritize this study, to take our wisdom studies to the next level.

When we study our own selves, we must know our unique individual selves, but we must also seek out something deeper, our human-ness. The part of us that we share in common. Observing our shared human-

ness interacting with different settings can yield great insights into both the nature of our human-ness and the nature of our culture. And as the culture keeps changing, and faster all the time, it becomes more and more essential to step away and connect to our human-ness.

Once we learn to delve into our human-ness, we may begin to stumble upon some true insights. Many say that wisdom is unchanging, that there are some absolute truths about wisdom – but what are they and how do we discover them? How do we try them out? How do we make them a part of our daily lives?

In founding the Urbanmonks Thinktank, I have tried to create a location where ideas can be gathered and shared on the process of adjusting our approach to emotional health. Generally we do not focus on a proactive approach, but rather we react and try and fix problems after they arise. This approach works reasonably well, but when we are facing the situation where millions are dealing with the common emotional maladies of anxiety and depression, when we have twice as many suicides as murders in America, it is time to think proactively: how do we make us more resilient, how do we grow wiser children, teens, adults and elders?

The second aspect that the Urbanmonks Thinktank proposes is a system-based approach. We currently try and fix the individual. Yet, we are all products of our environments. It is my observation that many of those struggling with anxiety and depression are not inherently damaged people, but they are normal humans placed in cultures (systems), both large and small, that foster anxiety and depression.

So my method is born out of this goal: to investigate the relationship between our minds and the settings, both the physical settings and the social systems, we have built. I have come to refer to this study as Emotional Topography. Topography meaning the detailed mapping or charting of an area. In this case, are building emotional maps.

By *culture* I am referring to the many layers of culture: there is indeed a culture of our relationships, of our households, of our workplaces, our villages and neighborhoods. Culture means the social setting: the relationships between characters and the rules, official and implied that govern the social system. Culture also includes the physical settings: the general ambiance, the lighting, the colors and the textures of a place.

Too often we think too large when we think about social systems, when we think about culture. American Culture. Modern Culture. These are enormous. Trying to change the trajectory of these levels of culture is an overwhelming task. It is more empowering and more possible to change our local systems, our local cultures.

The key method for my study is anthropological in nature: to spend time in dozens of different settings and to compare the various experiences. I have lived in large cities, small cities, and rural towns. I have worked many short-term jobs, from seasonal positions to year-long teaching gigs. My jobs have paid the bills, as jobs do, but I have sought out jobs where I was going to learn a whole new set of skills and be exposed to a new sub-culture.

Take the past three years in New York City as an example. I taught in a diverse inner-city high school at the border of Bushwick and East New York in Brooklyn. Then I honed my design and carpentry skills by building a street cart to sell books in Union Square Park. As I write these words, I am managing a café in Soho part-time. Three very different worlds, three different sets of relationships and responsibilities. Three very different landscapes when we consider them from the lens of emotional topography, yet all three are nestled within the broader American culture and New York City cultures.

All of the years since I studied Urban Design in graduate school have been similarly variable. But this is how I have performed my independent research, with new skills and new relationships in different settings. The theory was that if I could know enough workplaces,

enough sub-cultures, enough systems, enough relationships, I would have a good sense of how this human mind worked - how it thrived and how it crumbled – in relation to various settings. The theory was that if I worked alongside hundreds of people and was able to interact with thousands of folk in various settings, I would begin to better understand what was unique about individuals, but also, and more importantly for our study, what was common to us all.
