

Zhi

Jason Shaltiel
Baruch College –CUNY
October 14 2014

Aristotle says that virtuous people have practical wisdomⁱ. He separated wisdom into different categories but placed an emphasis on practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is acquired through experiences, and while it can be gained through teachings he felt that practical interactions were the best way at acquiring wisdom and ‘living the good life.’ⁱⁱ

My father once told me that the wisest men are those that say the least - he was paraphrasing from the Old Testament. My father was raised in Iran, in a Jewish and very religious household, so he would often recite biblical sayings and stories to me growing up. The context in which he told me this quote was during a walk from temple when I remarked at how others in the congregation were speaking when they shouldn't have been. However, my father did not mean that those who were speaking were not wise, what he meant was that if I wanted to change others I needed to lead by example and not through instructions. This encapsulates the virtue of “Zhi” and Aristotle’s interpretation of wisdom.

Until I was 13 years old I struggled in school. After elementary school I attended a high-school for teenagers that struggled academically. Each day I would look around me and think I don't belong here; I still have nightmares of walking through the halls of the building. Being in that school was a wakeup call: I started to care about my studies and became the head of my class, I started working outside of school and volunteering for charitable organizations. I sought to change the direction of my life: I was working towards acquiring “Zhi.”

Just before my junior year of high school I transferred to a school that specialized in performing arts and offered a rigorous academic curriculum. I enrolled in classes that challenged me intellectually and participated in the school’s mock trial club. When I wasn't working or preparing for school I would try to broaden my knowledge by reading *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*; to this day I haven't gone a week without reading either publication. I

would also frequent a second hand bookstore in Manhattan and buy a book every few weeks. At the same time I continued working and would volunteer for one day each week outside of school.

The community service I did was packing and delivering boxes of food to impoverished families in Brooklyn. I did this from freshman to junior year in high school. At times the recipients would ask that I come into their home and place the box in their kitchen. I was disheartened to see how what life was like for many living only a few blocks away from me. I was relieved when a recipient would ask that I leave the box in front of their door because I was embarrassed to know that each recipient had an identity. My partner who would drive me to each house knew all of the families we were making deliveries to because he had been delivering to them for years. At times he would try to tell me about them but I stopped him – I didn't want to know. But the hardest part of the job was seeing children living in those homes. It's easy to come to terms with why an adult may be living in certain circumstances but seeing children living in poor conditions is still too much for me to bear.

Delivering packages to impoverished families didn't afford me the wisdom of how lucky I am compared to others – I don't believe anyone can ever reach that understanding – instead I learnt that I can make the difference in other people's lives.

At the age of 16 I was appointed manager of several employees in a chain of retail stores in Manhattan. My promotion was the result of two years of work. I started in the company by handing out fliers on the streets of Manhattan during the winter time. I did this for months and I developed humility: I wasn't embarrassed when a friend from school saw me handing out coupons for small discount stores; I understood that no job was too low for and I gained the courage of approaching people in the street.

Becoming a manager was intimidating at first because everyone at work was older than me. But despite the age gap I was an effective manager because I led through my actions and not with instruction. When a store received goods I would carry them into the store, I processed all incoming and outgoing orders, swept the floors, took out the trash, made each weekly schedule, managed payroll, trained new employees, resolved disputes and much more. I was practicing “Zhi” because I had an understanding of how to work with others. I also understood that I needed to be careful in how I treated my staff because of the significant age gap.

The way I conducted myself at school was similar. I came to each class prepared and confident. When the teacher broke the class up into groups I would be the most outspoken member of my group. In mock trial I worked hard and motivated others; I was eventually appointed captain of the team and we made it past several rounds in a citywide competition:

I developed the ability to control, what Plato describes, unjust appetites – glory and profit.ⁱⁱⁱ By controlling these appetites I better affected the lives of others around me whether it was my coworkers, teammates on mock trial or families that needed assistance. Controlling the unjust appetites has also made me live a more fulfilling life. Without “Zhi” the prospects of my future wouldn’t be as bright and I would not have developed the network of friends and connections that I currently have. “Zhi” gave purpose to my life: my life is not centered around me but on a multitude of things and people.

While “Zhi” has been extremely rewarding I have faced many obstacles in acquiring and practicing it. Aristotle wrote that if anything has a function the good is to perform that function well.^{iv} In my pursuit of “Zhi” I often took on so many responsibilities that at times I would be overwhelmed and the product of my work suffered. I still face this struggle today – last summer I began working on an independent political campaign while attending school and working – and

while I can't say I've overcome this problem I have come up with it when I needed to. For example at my most recent job I developed a system using software that I downloaded to do a large part of my job on its own. I also received school credits for a lot of my work, excusing me from some school work.

In practicing "Zhi" I had difficulties in being an effective leader. A big factor that is required to succeed in mock trial is the ability to maintain composure and putting on a professional presentation. Many of my peers struggled at this and I wanted them to improve. I helped some of my peers overcome this obstacle by working closely with them and our mentors. I would also be very careful my tone when critiquing them; everything I said was of a light tone but I remained effective in getting my point across.

The greatest hardship of "Zhi" is that acquiring it is a lifelong journey that I know I will never complete. Every so often I look back at things I've done in my life, things I thought I did well, and I think that had I done that today I would have done it better. However, despite this I feel great when I practice and gain wisdom. It's hard to explain the gratification I get from pursuing wisdom, when I try to explain I'm branded as weird and nerdy - for example others think it's strange that I never watch television because I'd rather do something productive - but I don't think I'll ever want to stop. I like being different.

Works Cited

ⁱ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.13.1144b30-32

ⁱⁱ Kraut, Richard. "Aristotle's Ethics." *Stanford University*. Stanford University, 01 May 2001. Web. 10 Oct. 2014. (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/>)

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Republic." In *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, 581d. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

^{iv} Christine M. Korsgaard *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Jul., 1986), pp. 259-279 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27743773>)

^v Robert E. Lee, General quote – "The education of a man is never completed until he dies."