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Why Experience Matters

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Kathleen Cahalan on “Why Experience Matters”

DECEMBER 1, 2016

Kathleen Cahalan

Do you want a cardiac surgeon who is not a good cutter? Or a child care provider who does not know the difference between a bad mood and a tantrum? Or a judge who does not know how to administer the law?

Experience matters because it is the basis of good judgment. It provides us with insight into the particularities of situations. But experience alone is not enough, according to Aristotle. That knowledge must be combined with wisdom (*sophia*), what we hold to be the highest moral truths. Together these two kinds of knowledge provide a person with *phronesis*—the ability to do the “right thing, in the right way, and at the right time.” *Phronesis* is engaged knowing; it is situational and particular but at the same time informed by reason and moral frameworks.

As the authors of *Christian Practical Wisdom* write, practical wisdom “denotes a kind of knowing that is morally attuned, rooted in a tradition that affirms the good, and drive toward aims that seek the good. It is not a package of pre-planned rules but stays open and adaptive to new situations. It is nimble and at times even self-critical. Most of all, this knowledge is

practical, grounded in ordinary experience, and learned over time in the company of others and for the sake of others.”

Why is being a good cutter not enough for a cardiac surgeon? For one, it reduces the practice of surgery to a technical skill. Aristotle’s point is that phronesis is less about the cardiac surgeon’s ability to cut into your chest, and more about her ability to understand your particular heart condition, to respond to your emotional needs, and to help you find ways to change your life so that open surgery may not be necessary. The surgeon has to bring her knowledge about how hearts work to bear on your particular situation and she must bring that into play with what she discerns is your ability to face surgery or make adaptive changes in your lifestyle. She has to be able to talk to you about your hopes and fears for your life. And that will be distinctive in comparison to the next patient.

That said, the surgeon’s ability to do surgery is essential. In fact, what the body knows is essential to experience and practical wisdom. As many artists, neonatal nurses, musicians, and athletes will tell you: the body must be trained, over time, in order that it be inscribed with a kind of muscle memory about how to do what needs to be done. Richard Bresnahan, artist-in-residence and Master Potter at Saint John’s Pottery, requires his apprentices to make 1000 mugs. They can only come to know what clay is and what it does by practice, practice, and more practice. Clay is different if it is 80 degrees and sunny or 30 below and frigid.

Phronesis requires this kind of attention to embodied practical experience. Bent Flyvbjerg, an expert on megaproject management, notes that learning to make judgments in everyday situations requires extensive experience. “Common to all experts is that they operate on the basis of intimate knowledge of several thousand concrete cases in their areas of expertise.” A child care provider has seen enough tantrums to know what they are; he’s also dealt with enough children to make a pretty good guess about what this child needs in this moment. Of course, he could be wrong, but that’s just more experience to add to his case-based knowing. The same is true for the judge.

Combining embodied know-how, practical reasoning, and situational understanding with decision-making ability, is what nursing educator Patricia Benner calls “a sense of salience.” Such a practitioner knows what to do and when and why to do it, and they can give reasons for their actions. Such knowledge only comes from practice where mistakes and failures become opportunities for figuring out what just happened and how one might do it differently the next time a similar case comes around.

Some think that little or no experience is a good thing when taking up a new position, work that one has never performed, and in a context in which a person has never worked. It may be that people can bring fresh perspectives to unfamiliar situations. But a lack of experience can be quite costly to them and to others. They lack practical wisdom, the experience necessary upon which to base their actions and judgments. They have not practiced enough to build up a body of insight based on at least 1,000 cases.

And that’s why experience really matters.

Kathleen A. Cahalan, professor of practical theology, Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary, is one of the five authors of Christian Practical Wisdom, published by Wm. E. Eerdmans in 2016.