

## FACTOIDS, FACTS, INFORMATION, KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM

### Systemic Analysis in the “Information Age”

We live in a time of unending “information” coming at us in a variety of formats. Each piece of information comes from sources that may or may not be named, verified or traceable. Yet the sheer volume of information as well as the increasing speed with which we are being called to make decisions, often means that we have little or no time to assess this “information.”

At the same time, the effects of decisions are having unparalleled effects on persons and communities around the world. The question underlying all of this is the truthfulness of the facts upon which these decisions are made. Often, what passes for facts is partial information, or opinions from one or more points of view, or the deliberate withholding of other information so that decisions are made without knowledge of the whole.

Information is often buried beneath the burden of personality, where what is said is interpreted in terms of who said it, the style with which it is said, and the audience who were the first to hear it. All of this sheds no light on the truthfulness or verifiability of information.

To understand the systems within which we live and work and which affect the lives of others, we need to stop and sort out this “information.” We need to begin to see the pieces of truth that may be within. In doing so, we may begin to see the patterns that those pieces of information can provide.

### FACTOIDS

The first step is to recognize “factoids,” those statements that seem to be based on substance yet, when carefully traced back to their source, have no basis for reality. A factoid starts with the repetition of a statement. The Iraq “Weapons of Mass Destruction” is a current painful example.

Factoids are created in the following manner. Person A makes a statement. It may or may not have any reality basis. Person B then repeats what Person A said. Simple repetition, no more, no less. Person C, upon hearing Person B, then quotes Person B to someone else. It is now a direct quote. Direct quotes, cite-able, reference-able. That it may or may not have any basis in reality means nothing when this happens. Factoids are not facts. Nor are factoids anchored in truth or experience.

### FACTS

Facts are pieces of information. Obtaining information from a multiplicity of sources is at the heart of understanding the facts upon which we can base our work. Each source of facts provides facets of the truth of the whole. Each fact is like a tile in a mosaic. With the placement of the fact or tile, we are able to see a larger picture. Each source can provide a set of experiences, a set of tiles. This set is a history into which the facts from other sources can be added to create a picture of the whole.

Facts are not the same as opinions, although both can be valid pieces of information upon which to build our understanding.

It is crucial to recognize our own viewpoints, based upon our own histories, experiences, knowledge and the sources that we use to understand when we are seeing, hearing, confronting, experiencing. It is only when we are able to recognize what has brought us to our present understandings that we can fully realize that others, with other histories and experiences and sources of information, will have other pieces of truth.

At the same time, it is also critical that we do not automatically associate the ability to provide factual information only with those who have formal, i.e., classroom education. While formal education allows us to receive facts and information from a variety of sources, there still exist whole worlds of information assembled into knowledge bases among peoples for whom formal education is not the dominant form of information transfer. Too often these are important sources of information that are overlooked or deliberately omitted.

## KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

We only approach wisdom when we can sort through different perspectives and see how the pieces of facts come together. Patterns, rather than a disarray of information, allow greater understanding of the dynamics of the interplay between the facts. Patterns allow us to see the flow of knowledge and/or power within a situation or a system. Often the willingness and ability to look at the facts in a new alignment will provide an insight into the systems at work.

The pieces of mosaic now become a kaleidoscope. As we turn the kaleidoscope and hold it up to new light, the pieces come together in different patterns, enabling us to see different associations of color, or facts. We see new realities, and become aware of what sources are missing from which we have yet to receive factual information.

To be willing to see things in new patterns is an operative stage on the path to wisdom. The difference between knowledge and wisdom is that in wisdom there is timelessness, basic truths that are at the heart of who we are, what we do, and why we do it. Sorting out the kernels of wisdom that are buried within the "We've always done it this way so why shouldn't we continue to do it this way" is a collaborative task that requires openness of heart and mind, and the willingness to be a risk-taker.

## THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY

It is within community that we encounter and learn to rely on the presence of others who are also willing to uncover the pieces of wisdom contained within the experiences of people over time and across place. Destruction or weakening of community thwarts these efforts to achieve wisdom and justice. Current events and history hold many examples of the deliberate undermining of community in order to prevent the flow of more complete information.

The purpose of our newsletter column "From Where I Stand" is to hear someone's perspective, recognizing that it is one perspective seen from where that person stands. None of us has the whole truth. It is only when we are willing to hear other pieces and figure out how they fit together that we begin to approach real knowledge or wisdom.

Here at CREA we often say that the reason God made the earth round is so none of us can see the whole without the help of others.

Ruth A. Rosenbaum, TC, PhD

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