

***Sapere Aude* — Dare to Be Wise: 09 Kenneth D. Ward**

CHILDHOOD

Full name: Kenneth Daniel Ward (Aka, Ken)

Tell me about where you were born and how you grew up.

I grew up in Rhode Island, in a mill village called Lymanville. The Lymanville Mill was built on the Woonasquatucket River in 1809 and quickly attracted throngs of immigrants, including my Irish and French-Canadian ancestors, looking for textile jobs. Other mills quickly sprang up along the river. My mother's family was deeply rooted in the area with several generations working in these mills as wool sorters, spoolers, spinners, and doffers. My great-great-grandfather drowned one not-quite-cold-enough February afternoon in 1906 while ice fishing on the river across the street from the house where I grew up. It was a 1½ story mill house built in 1890 with four small rooms on each floor and no indoor bathrooms until 1948. The half-story second floor had low-to-the-floor windows that were the perfect height for me to see out of as a toddler. Through the years, generation after generation of my family shuffled through that house with the older folks moving downstairs so their grown children could start their families upstairs.

As James Taylor sang, "Mill work ain't easy, mill work ain't hard; mill work it ain't nothing but an awful boring job." My mother talked about how sad she felt as a young mother, leaving her family to work the evening shift in that cold, dark, brick building. I'd rush out of my elementary school in the afternoon to get to the bus stop near home where my mother waited to be taken to work. Often, I didn't make it in time and wouldn't see her again except for a few minutes before school the next morning, so I felt the same sadness. My family knew intuitively that the mill paradoxically gave them life but also took it away. When my grandmother delivered a stillborn baby who became strangled on the umbilical cord, the family was convinced it was caused by her work as a spinner, which involved

repetitive arm-over-head motion to replace the bobbins on top of the spinning machines.

It wasn't an easy life but the French Canadians in my family were disciplined, family-oriented and importantly, not drinkers, and they thrived. This wasn't the case for my father's Irish immigrant family. Both his parents were chronic alcoholics – Korsakoff's syndrome, DTs, unemployment, evictions with belongings being put out on the street by the police and kids shuttled to other family members, and general unrelenting chaos. This was much the case for the previous generations as well. My great-grandfather achieved national news coverage in 1919 for shooting at his wife as he chased her through the neighborhood and then trying to shoot himself. Fortunately, he wasn't a very good aim. My father did ok, all considered. He worked and supported his family, could be quite kind, and tried his best, but the multi-generational baggage took its toll, and he was often broke, depressed, drunk, and violent. My mother was chronically anxious and agoraphobic and put up as best she could. My home life was unpredictable and very stressful. I don't recount this to point fingers or assign blame. My parents did the best they could with what they had. As Kris Kristofferson pondered, "Who's to bless and who's to blame?"

What did your parents do for a living?

Millwork, until they no longer could. When manufacturing businesses moved to "right to work" states or overseas, my father worked as a janitor and my mother as a supermarket bagger. They both worked very hard all their lives with, ultimately, very little financially to show for their efforts.

What about your education?

Despite their lack of education, my parents valued it. When I was six, they wanted me to attend the local Catholic parish school, but I was rejected due to too many applicants and too little financial support from my parents. Instead, I attended the public Lymanville Elementary School from first through eighth grade where I

received a very good primary education. From the time I was young, my parents had the goal that I'd attend La Salle Academy, a Catholic high school run by the De LaSalle Christian Brothers which was *the* school for aspiring working- and middle-class Rhode Island boys. They wouldn't have been able to afford it, but I won an academic scholarship that paid half my tuition, and I worked to pay for the rest of it.

What kind of educational environment did you grow up in?

My world until high school was entirely working class. No one in my neighborhood or among my parents' friends had gone to college or had a professional job. Throughout high school I worked after school and weekends at a small family-run grocery store in my neighborhood. One of the regular customers was a philosophy professor at nearby Rhode Island College, Dr. Walter Blanchard. He was so different from anyone I knew and the first person to whom I could talk about the academic topics I cared about. He saw the psychology books I read during slow times and talked to me about them, sometimes bringing me journal articles to read and inviting me to campus lectures. His interest motivated me. I sat through lectures for which I had little background or context and tried to soak it in. Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim (infamous for confusing cause and effect in claiming that autism was caused by mothers rejecting their babies) and Julian Jaynes (Princeton psychologist who was all the rage in the late 1970s for his provocative book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*) were a couple of the speakers I saw. Those experiences, and the excellent preparation I received at LaSalle, set me on the course for college.

What were your interests in high school?

A later generation of kids wanted to become crime scene investigators from watching CSI on television. My career inspiration came from 1970s sitcom "The Bob Newhart Show." When I discovered as a ninth grader that one could have

a nice office, witty and interesting colleagues, and earn a living helping people with their psychological problems, I was all-in to become a clinical psychologist. I made a pest of myself to the science teacher at my high school who taught a psychology elective, read books that he recommended, and took his advice on doing psychology research projects. I liked English, history, biology, and most other courses (math, not so much) but psychology became my passion in high school. I was a geek. I hung out at the Rhode Island College library in my free time sifting through Psychological Abstracts and journals (which I understood little of) and did research projects that did well at local and state science fairs.

EDUCATION

Tell me about your experiences getting your undergraduate degree. (i.e., BA/BS, undergraduate degree, college).

I did my undergraduate work at Brown as a psychology major. Brown was a bastion of cognitive psychology back then. Speakers for the monthly departmental colloquium during my freshman year in 1980 included Albert Bandura and B.F. Skinner. The audience was receptive to Bandura's talk about social learning theory, but Skinner's radical behaviorism was a bridge too far. His colloquium talk was entitled "Columban simulation of cognitive processes." Essentially, it was a thumb in the eye of all the cognitive psychologists in the room with the message "Who needs cognition? I can condition my dumb pigeons to perform highly complex behaviors that you think require sophisticated internal 'mental processes'." I wish my 18-year-old pigeon-like brain could have fully appreciated that wry message, but at least I got to talk to Skinner afterwards and have him sign my lecture notes, which I still have.

Without financial support from my parents, Brown became too expensive for me, so I took two years off after my sophomore year and worked to save money. When I returned, I took a course entitled Behavioral Medicine that set me on my career path. I was fascinated that

psychology could be put to use to prevent and treat health problems. Several practicing clinical psychologists guest lectured about their work treating chronic pain, sleep and sexual disorders, obesity, and addictions. I was hooked. I did an honors thesis, under the direction of Drs. Larry Gorkin and Russell Church, about how cardiac medications affect cardiovascular reactivity during mental stress. And then I started working at Brown's Division of Behavioral Medicine, first in a chronic pain treatment program and then on smoking cessation studies. Tobacco use became my professional passion – because it was a good model for addictive behavior and an important public health problem, and also because smoking had ravaged the health of many of my family members. My father and his four siblings, all heavy smokers, died much too young from lung cancer.

What inspired you to get your master's degree (i.e., MA, MS, MPH, master's degree, college)?

Instead of going right on to graduate school, I worked for seven years after finishing my bachelor's degree as a research assistant and then project manager at Harvard and the V.A. Outpatient Clinic in Boston. This was a wonderful time in my life; I enjoyed my work in research and loved living in Boston but finally decided I had to get back to school if I wanted to get a real job. I went right into a PhD program in clinical health psychology at The University of Memphis and earned a M.S. along the way.

Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?

I'm lucky to have had good mentors in my early adult life who helped shape my career path. Ray Niaura and Dave Abrams, then at Brown, were my early inspirations as an undergraduate to pursue a career in clinical health psychology studying tobacco use and chronic disease prevention. My interest in a research career was cemented by working in Boston for Arthur "Jim" Garvey and Scott Weiss. Working with Jim at the V.A. Outpatient Clinic, I managed a NIH-funded research study that tracked smokers during an

unaided quit attempt. I learned a lot about tobacco use and addiction conducting detailed interviews with dozens of smokers several times during the year after they tried to quit. Working for Scott Weiss, a Harvard pulmonologist and epidemiologist, I managed an NIH-funded research study tracking cardiometabolic changes in the V.A. Normative Aging Study cohort. I learned about cardiovascular epidemiology and many practical research skills that have served me well throughout my career such as running large studies, managing and analyzing data, and assessing behavioral and biological cardiovascular risk factors.

What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?

Beyond the practical skills mentioned above, the greatest lesson I learned from all these early mentors was the pleasure of discovery – how satisfying it could be to pose questions and hypotheses, test them, and share that knowledge. I also learned to have a thick skin and to be patient, which is essential for researchers since rewards are intermittent.

Now tell me about your doctorate work. Again, what inspired you to go on, instead of getting a job out of your master's degree (i.e., doctorate, college).

A pivotal decision point for me came while working as a project manager at Harvard. I had done well – became a capable manager, learned to manage and analyze data, write papers, and help on grant proposals, with only a bachelor's degree. I was offered a professional data analytics job at the V.A. that would pay well, had considerable growth potential, and would not require more schooling. It was tempting, but it made me think seriously about what I wanted to do. I decided I wanted to be in academia – to get a PhD and become a clinical psychologist.

What factor or set of actors contributed to your pursuing an academic career and becoming a researcher?

As a PhD student, my goal was to work as a clinical health psychologist in an academic health setting, combining research and clinical practice. That never happened. When still a student, my mentor, Bob Klesges, received university support to start his own research center and he offered me an Assistant Professor position when I finished. Having a job waiting for me was a big motivator to finish my degree quickly. I wrote an NIH FIRST award (R29 mechanism, which NIH no longer offers) during my last year of graduate school which was funded on the first attempt, giving me unrealistic expectations that getting funded was easy! The R29 funded 50% of my salary for five years and the other 50% came from a local foundation grant that paid me to work with community organizations in Memphis to evaluate their programs and help them get funding. I spent the first six years after getting my PhD writing grants; this was great experience but, ultimately, not satisfying. Over time, I found I enjoyed working with students and teaching and decided to transition to a more balanced, tenure-track position.

Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?

In addition to my mentor, Bob Klesges, I had several wonderful professors at Memphis who were talented researchers, clinicians, and teachers, including Will Shadish, Art Houts, Andy Meyers, Jim Whelan, Leslie Robinson, and Kenny Lichstein. They exemplified the “Boulder Model” of scientist-practitioner training in clinical psychology. I learned a lot from them all.

What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?

One important lesson was to be your own worst critic – to always be skeptical, especially about one’s own assumptions. Confirmation bias is real. Another lesson, learned from Bob Klesges,

was to avoid well-trodden research paths; he encouraged me to develop interests in areas where there weren’t already loads of well-established researchers working.

Tell me about the relationship you had with your major advisor.

I went to Memphis specifically to work with Bob Klesges. His research perfectly matched my interests in smoking cessation, obesity treatment, and the interplay of smoking and weight. Bob was successful at getting NIH grants and had a reputation of involving students in research right away and getting them out the door quickly. That appealed to me since I was 31 years old when I started grad school and didn’t want to be a student the rest of my life. Bob wasn’t a “touchy feely” kind of guy. I don’t think he ever asked me how I was doing psychologically or what kind of support I needed. But he was enormously productive, and one could learn a lot by riding his coattails, especially with formulating good research questions and writing manuscripts and grants. He provided me with numerous opportunities and was always in my corner, and I’ll forever be grateful for that. He also taught me that one could be productive and have a life. He always was available to be involved in his kids’ lives, to attend his beloved Memphis Tigers basketball games, to read mystery novels (and to write one), and to get away to his favorite place on earth – Disney World. Bob passed away last year, and I miss him.

Tell me about what you studied as a student, and what led you down that path.

I entered my PhD program interested in studying tobacco cessation and obesity and did clinical work and research in these areas. I developed an additional interest quite by accident – bone health and osteoporosis prevention. Bob had acquired a DEXA machine to assess body composition, and we were conducting studies with college athletes. One day, while playing with the data, I discovered that University of Memphis basketball players were losing bone density over the course of their training season. This was

unexpected since physical activity, particularly weight-bearing activities such as basketball, has well-known bone accrual properties. We suspected that this might increase the risk of stress fractures, hinder athletic performance, and possibly predispose to osteoporosis later in life. We collected more data, saw that this was a real phenomenon, and then developed a dietary intervention for these athletes to prevent bone loss. This became my master's thesis. I spent a couple basketball seasons in the locker room at each practice and game doling out a high calcium and Vitamin D sports drink that we concocted. When my students these days complain about unpleasant tasks I give them, I regale them with the story of how I spent a hot, humid Memphis summer in a 110-degree un-air-conditioned gymnasium, wringing out sweat from basketball players' t-shirts to measure their calcium excretion. The work was onerous, but the results were encouraging and were published in *JAMA*. In the meantime, I remained interested in smoking and combined these two interests for my dissertation, conducting a meta-analysis of epidemiological studies that assessed effects of smoking on bone. Twenty-five years down the line, this paper still is read and is my most widely cited publication. I pursued bone research for my FIRST award. Given the unexpected negative effects of physical activity on bone that we saw for basketball players, I wondered whether high levels of non-weight bearing endurance activity would hinder bone development in children and adolescents. I conducted a cohort study of competitive child and adolescent swimmers, tracking their bone density over two years along with their exercise patterns, diet, and pubertal changes. Fortunately for these kids, my hypothesis was not supported; swimming did not slow bone growth. I think this was the Hawthorne effect; coaches knew my hypothesis and over the course of the study added weight training to their swimming programs, obliterating the expected effect.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Let's move beyond your education time and talk about your career. What has been your proudest research or other professional accomplishment to date?

My proudest contribution has been my work with the Syrian Center for Tobacco Studies (SCTS). Early in my academic career, as an assistant professor, I teamed up with an inspiring group of fellow early career investigators, including Wasim Maziak, Tom Eissenberg, Taghrid Asfar, Fawaz Mzayek, and Mark Vander Weg. We responded to a funding opportunity in 2001 from NIH's Fogarty International Center entitled "International Tobacco and Health Research and Capacity Building Program" and received an R01 to create the SCTS in Aleppo, Syria. Over the next two decades we trained many individuals who went on to have successful research careers, established Syria's first IRB, obtained more than a dozen grants from NIH and international funders, produced more than 150 scientific papers, and did valuable work to understand and reduce tobacco use in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. We were the first research group to document the global spread of waterpipe (hookah) use along with its determinants and health consequences. I recounted this work during my AAHB Research Laureate presentation in 2017 and wrote about it for this journal (<https://newprairiepress.org/hbr/vol1/iss1/5/>).

Were there any projects or studies you thought would lead to something interesting, that just didn't pan out?

Many! I joke that my specialty is designing clinical trials that produce null effects. In behavioral interventions, I've tended to design elaborate (e.g., matched contact time) comparison conditions that perform better than expected. I think this speaks to the value of high-quality therapeutic relationships and the limitations of our health behavior theories.

Tell me about your philosophy that guides your research chain of inquiry and your academic pursuits.

Two major considerations have guided my work. First, avoid being siloed. I declined opportunities for positions in psychology departments because I didn't want to work only, or primarily, with people who were trained the way I was trained and thought about problems the way I thought about problems. It's become a truism, but I firmly believe that multi/trans-disciplinary approaches and team science are more efficient and effective paths to discovery. Second, stick to the basics if you want to move a field forward. An influential paper for me, which I first read as a doctoral student, is John Platt's "Strong Inference" published in *Science* in 1964. (<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.146.3642.347>). Platt argued that the scientific fields that have made the greatest advances are those that rely on the tried-and-true deductive scientific method that we were all taught in high school: formulate multiple competing hypotheses, design studies with different outcomes to falsify each hypothesis, obtain a clear result, and then repeat the process. It has been argued, quite legitimately I think, that this approach does not work for all scientific problems and is not, in fact, how many great discoveries have been made (e.g., <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27759412>). However, I think this approach could and should be used much more than it is in many fields, including health behavior research. As one example, I've grown tired of reading so-called "theory-based" behavioral intervention trials that aren't rigorously designed to disconfirm the theory's utility in behavior change – because the theory's constructs are not well operationalized, no evidence is presented that the theoretical constructs mediated observed changes in the outcome, and/or that the comparison intervention was not designed to rule out competing hypotheses about change mechanisms.

Inasmuch as you have been successful in disseminating your research, what advice do you have for young professionals who struggle?

Stay focused and prioritize getting your work published. This sounds obvious but many of us, me included, take on too much and get distracted by more immediate demands on our time than publishing. Set aside time regularly to write and get comfortable saying "no" to tasks that benefit others' careers more than your own.

What single best piece of advice would you pass along to a new investigator or student researcher-in-training today?

Following up on my last point, if you want a successful research career, you need to stay focused. For better or worse, I enjoyed many professional activities besides research, but I would have had more research success had I declined time-consuming administrative and service roles early in my career. Know who you are and what you want.

Describe the most courageous thing you have had to do in your academic career—perhaps something that put you at risk for the sake of standing up for a principle.

I don't think of myself as a courageous person, at least in the sense of being front and center, easily taking difficult stands and championing causes. I'm fairly quiet and reserved and prefer the role of mediator and peacemaker. The flip side is that I can be quite ornery and dogged when I feel an injustice is being committed. This tension has played out numerous times in my professional life as a middle manager – as a research center director, department head, and now as an assistant dean of faculty affairs. My favorite op/ed columnist, David Brooks of the *New York Times*, published an article last year entitled "The Quiet Magic of Middle Managers" in which he said: "The leaders we admire are paying close attention to those who work with them. They are not self-centered but cast the beam of their care on others, making them feel seen and lit up. In how you see me, I come to see myself. If you cast

a just and loving attention on people, they blossom.” Any courage that I manifest has come from trying to embody this, particularly in working with junior colleagues, for example addressing bullying of a student by a faculty member or a younger faculty member by a senior faculty member. On a good day, I have managed to navigate these tense situations in a way consistent with Brooks’ ideal manager: “The best of them don’t resolve our disputes but lift us above them so that we can see disagreements from a higher and more generous vantage point.” But sometimes I’ve been too strident to the point where my attempts to stop bullying feel like bullying by some.

When your professional career ends, how would you like to be remembered?

As someone who, like my parents, did the best he could with what he had. To throw in one final song quote, in the words of Mary Gauthier, “Every single one of us could use some mercy now.”

Professionals in any field have been known to say there is a price for success. To what extent has that been your experience in the academic world?

There are much easier ways to earn a living than academia. I’ve worked harder and for much less money than many of my friends in other careers, but I don’t regret it. I feel lucky to have landed on a career that gave me a good deal of independence, allowed me to contribute in ways that I valued, and paid the bills.

LIFE OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA

Who are the people outside of your professional world who have impacted your life and what have some of those impacts been?

My wife, Kerrie, is as different from me as one could imagine in terms of interests, skills, and temperament. She’s a talented textile designer, artist, and teacher. We have a son, Lucas, now 18, who has been an absolute joy to raise. His

kindness, empathy, and passion for so many things inspire me, and I’m now preparing myself psychologically for him to leave the nest. And I’m lucky to have a few decades-long friendships that continue to enrich my life.

What are some leisure time activities for which you have a passion?

I’m a slow but avid reader – history, science, biography, and fiction. Music also is a passion. Although I’ve never played a musical instrument, I’ve been a big fan since I was a small child. I was one of those kids who constantly held a tape recorder up to the TV and radio to capture musical performances and made tons of mix tapes for friends. I’ve attended thousands of concerts over the past 50 years. (A word of caution to all the kids out there: wear ear protection! My hearing is shot from standing too close to booming speakers in countless music venues). I love non-commercial, community radio and have been a volunteer DJ for the past 25 years. This still brings me a lot of joy because it puts me in a distinctly different “head space” than my day job. It’s hard to think of anything else when I’m on air. Through the years I’ve hosted a variety of music shows – bluegrass, blues, Celtic, country, folk, jazz, rock, and rockabilly. I especially love old-time country music, and for many years have hosted a weekly show on WEVL in Memphis called “Back to the Country.” I also host a Great American Songbook and jazz show on WEVL called “The Supper Club” playing artists like Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Tony Bennett, and Doris Day. Since moving to New Mexico two years ago, I’ve been recording these shows at home, which isn’t nearly as rewarding as being in the studio, but I’m again hosting a live country show, called “Tombstone Every Mile” on KUPR. Every Sunday afternoon I drive north from Albuquerque to the village of Placitas in the foothills of the beautiful Sandia Mountains and commune with the ghosts of my musical idols like Hank Williams, George Jones, Merle Haggard, Loretta Lynn, Ernest Tubb, and The Carter Family.

If you could spend an evening with anyone, living or dead, contemporary character or historical figure, who would it be and what would you want to talk about?

I greatly admire former *New York Times* columnist David Brooks who seems to me to be a voice of reason and wisdom in a world that's gone mad. I appreciate his moderate and historically contextualized political philosophy and views on the importance of community, morality, and developing an inner life. I'm also interested in genealogy and family history and would love to resurrect for an evening any of my ancestors who emigrated to the U.S. in the nineteenth century. I'm curious what their lives were like beyond the limited information I can glean from census and vital statistics records.

If you weren't doing what you are doing career-wise, what would you be doing?

I joke that I was meant to be a pedal steel guitar player in a traveling hillbilly band. More realistically, I think I would have made a decent historian. In college, I considered graduate school to study the history of religions, but having to master several ancient languages was a dealbreaker.

Which three books outside of academia would you recommend for others to read and why?

This is the toughest question of this interview because it's like asking "which of your children do you love most?" but here goes: 1) *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis. He authored this novel in 1936 in response to the rise of totalitarianism in Italy and Germany. The story and the characters map perfectly onto what's happening in the U.S. right now; 2) *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe. A friend of mine refers to Wolfe as "that windbag southern author" because of his verbose, often stream-of-conscious prose, but to me it's lyrical and magical, speaks of timeless themes such as our search for meaning, and paints a vivid picture of life in America during the early twentieth century; and 3) *Lucifer's Drum* by my friend

Bernie MacKinnon. Bernie is a wonderful writer, and this is a suspenseful and well-researched historical novel about the U.S. Civil War. I truly hated to reach the last page of this book.

Share something about yourself that you believe is misunderstood by others.

I probably seem standoffish to people who don't know me well. This is because I have a poor memory, especially visual memory, and often don't remember or recognize people – their names, how we know each other, or even whether we've met before. It takes several "exposures" before I remember someone. It embarrasses me greatly and my coping strategies (mentally rehearsing names, looking at photos before events) are only partially helpful.

Editor's note.

Dr. Ward joined the American Academy of Health Behavior in 2004, was named Fellow of The Academy in 2007, and honored as the 16th Research Laureate in 2017 for his contributions to health behavior research; he currently serves the Academy as Associate Editor of *Health Behavior Research*.

Elbert D. Glover and Robert J. McDermott are the Feature Editors of *Sapere Aude*.