



# Overcoming Artificial Maturity With Relational Wisdom

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## The Ugly Truth

There I was, sitting in my parked car, building up the courage to step outside and brave the freezing temperature. Winter in Montana either toughens you or sends you south.

I had just finished a late shift at my retail job during my sophomore year of college. As I sat there thinking about all the homework I still had to finish, I received a call from my good friend, Eli. We talked about how things were going for him in Bozeman, laughed at some fun memories we had during our freshman year, and made plans to go snowboarding the next time he was back in town.

Eli and I used to be roommates at Montana State University in Bozeman. In fact, all my close friends from high school were in Bozeman. Everyone except me.

After the call, I stepped out into the cold and walked to my apartment. *Man, I miss Bozeman*, I thought to myself. As I worked through my homework later that evening, my mind kept drifting back to my first year of college and all the events that forced me to come back to Billings.

I had received a full tuition scholarship to Montana State University. My closest friends and I all headed there together to begin a new chapter in our lives. We were excited, and the future looked bright. What I did not realize was that I was not as prepared for the real world as I thought I was.

Over the course of that year, I had routinely made wrong decisions. Wrong decisions about homework, wrong decisions about relationships and wrong decisions about my priorities.

Because of those decisions, I failed to keep an adequate GPA to maintain my scholarship, missing it by just 0.01). Thousands of dollars flew out the window because of my lack of discipline.

I could not afford to stay at MSU without a scholarship, so I came back and continued my education at a smaller college in Billings. That wasn't the worst of it, however. I left Bozeman with fewer friends than I had when I began college. My immature behavior ruined friendships and drove many people away.

That year had been one disaster after the other, and all of it was my own doing. I was a classic case of an **"artificially mature"** teen, and I was suffering the consequences of it. In fact, as I write this story a few years after my shattering freshman year, I am still suffering some of those consequences, such as paying off a large college loan. How did this all happen?

## Failure to Launch

I was a highly disciplined student in high school, which enabled me to get good grades, excel in music, drama and sports and earn a major scholarship to college. By God's grace, I was also disciplined in my personal life, which enabled me to earn a Black Belt in Tai-Kwon-Do, serve at church camps, mentor younger children and avoid the temptations that ensnared many of my peers.

What I learned too late, however, was that getting good grades and living a moral life at home didn't mean I was ready for the real world. What I had failed to develop (despite my parents' earnest teaching) was authentic wisdom and maturity.

First Corinthians 13:11 says, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me." Proverbs 4:7-8 tells us to "get wisdom...prize her highly, and she will exalt you."

Although I had read passages like these many times, I didn't really understand them or apply them in my life, for which I paid a high price.

## An All-Too-Common Pattern

What about you? Have you put childish ways behind you? Are you pursuing wisdom as aggressively as you pursue academic, sports or artistic success ... or simply pleasure and fun?

Don't misunderstand me. I'm a strong proponent of academic, sports and artistic excellence. Each of us should do all we can to develop the gifts that God has given to us. But excellence in any or all of these areas is no substitute for authentic personal maturity and godly wisdom.

As we finish high school and look to the future, most of us strive to figure out our paths, our talents and our dreams. We struggle to decide where we want to go with our lives, what we want to do and who we want to become.

We also struggle with competing influences in society. For many of us, the main influence in our early lives has been our parents, who have raised us and guided us. They sought to shape and influence who we would become. None of them are perfect, but they have poured their lives into raising us. Everything they have taught us has been in the hopes of launching us onto a path of happiness and fulfillment.

Yet, today with all the advances in technology and social media, the voices of outside influences have drastically increased. Many of those influences are explicitly anti-Christian. As you enter college, those voices grow increasingly louder, more hostile and more popular. Therefore, on top of trying to discern your career major, your school of choice and all your other academic questions, you will have to deal with life-altering moral, spiritual and philosophical questions.

Think about your biggest questions at this stage of your life. Don't they all boil to one simple question: "Am I really ready to launch?" To avoid crashing and burning like a poorly built rocket, each of us needs to be honest with ourselves when answering this life-impacting question.

## The Weaknesses of the "iY" Generation

Young adults, age 27 and under, are a part of what is sometimes referred to as the "iY" generation. That means we were born after 1990, after the advances in technology and media. Therefore, we have had access to the internet all of our lives. In fact, most of us don't

know what it would be like without cell phones, computers, social media, and quick access to news and information.

Easy access to technology can be both good and bad. Because of our unlimited access to technology, most of us “know about” many things. We have many more facts stored in our minds or at our fingertips than our parents did when they were our age.

This can be very misleading, however. Having quick access to information on Google does not necessarily mean that we are more mature or wiser than our parents are. Much of what we know is simply a lot of random information. Ask an online encyclopedia any fact-based question, and it can spit out an answer in no time.

When it comes to real wisdom, however, to applying this information to our lives and society, to addressing life’s real challenges, such as how to handle relationships or how to control sinful emotions and desires, even the best encyclopedia will fail us.

Most teens have acquired vast amounts of information but are so dependent on technology that they often have trouble functioning in real life situations and relationships. Tim Elmore addresses this problem in his book, *Artificial Maturity*.<sup>1</sup> To help us understand the challenges posed by pervasive technology, he uses two ancient Greek words that translate as “knowledge.”

- One word is *Ginosko*, which means to be aware of; to be informed of; to become acquainted with. That is what you and I have. That is what most teens have: they have become acquainted with a great deal of information.
- We are extremely well informed, but we often lack the kind of knowledge described by the second word Elmore uses: *Oida*. This word means to fully perceive and understand something through experience and responsibility.

The point Elmore makes is that many teens have a great deal of information in their minds or at their fingertips, but most of it was not gained through personal experience or responsibility. This vast amount of data can give the illusion that we are mature and wise, when in fact we still have a great deal to learn about real life.

Dr. Elmore describes this deficit in these stark terms:

“Generations ago, 14-year-olds used to drive, 17-year-olds used to lead armies, and even average teens contributed labor and income that helped keep their families afloat. While facing other problems, those teens displayed adult-like maturity far more quickly than today’s who are remarkably well kept, but cut-off from most of the responsibility, challenge, and growth-producing feedback of the adult-work...a hundred years ago, 12-year-olds were reading and discussing Cicero, and kids as young as 4 contributed to the family chores. More was expected of them and adults discovered that it was in them to meet their appropriate responsibilities as members of the family.”

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<sup>1</sup> Elmore, Tim. *Artificial Maturity*. John Wiley & Sons, 2012.



What about you? Be honest with yourself. At seventeen, could you see yourself getting married, leading a family and working a steady job that would help to support your family financially rather than using that money for your own pleasure?

I know that for myself the answer is no. At seventeen, I thought I knew everything, but my mind, like the minds of most of my peers, was focused on having fun ... on doing what made me feel good, not on what needed to be done or on opportunities to help others.

The word I would use to describe most teens is "self-focused," doing mostly what benefits them and fulfills their own desires. They "know" many facts, but like me at that age, they do not know how to use that knowledge or interact well with other people.

This is why we see so much bullying, gossip, and hatred among teens, especially in high school. They do not know how to handle relationships in a mature way; therefore, they focus on themselves, which only increases their relational difficulties and delays their transition into adulthood.

As Dr. Elmore puts it, "Children are overexposed to information long before they're ready. Yet, they are underexposed to real-life experiences far later than they should be."

We can see the consequences of this phenomenon throughout our society. Social media has become *anti-social*. We have difficulties genuinely communicating with others and building real relationships. We possess a false sense of readiness to face what the world will throw at us. All that results in shattered expectations and tumultuous emotional fallout. Social media has its place, but it is training us to be satisfied with superficial relationships instead of developing genuine maturity and authentic connections with other people.

Many teens connect with others primarily through texting, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook. With little effort, they can acquire hundreds of "friends," who are not really friends at all, but simply names on a screen. There is no depth to their communication, no genuine empathy, no sacrificial caring and no meaningful bond.

If a Facebook friend disappoints you, you simply "defriend" him. How simple. How easy. How superficial! Instagram lets others see only what we want them to see...usually only the best about ourselves. They do not see reality.

Texting, Snapchat and Twitter have become the primary communication channels for countless teens and young adults. Consequently, our generation is losing the ability to talk face-to-face, look people in the eyes, discern emotions and even think critically for ourselves.

As I found out myself, teens who think they can handle relationships casually are in for a big shock when they get into the real world. When they have a difficult teacher, an unpleasant co-worker or a critical boss, they look for the "defriend button" and cannot find it. As a result, according to Dr. Elmore, 80% of the iY generation end up dropping out of school, quitting their jobs, ending relationships and moving back home with mom and dad.

I thought I was wise and ready to meet the world head on! I was wrong. I ignored the warning signs as well as the advice of my mentors and parents and fell prey to artificial maturity. You may be in danger of doing the same thing.

God gave us parents to lead, guide and prepare us for life. Most parents try to help us see warning signs in our lives, but they don't always understand how different the world is for us.

When our parents were young and wanted to talk with their friends or spend time with them, they had to do so in person. They learned to read body language and facial expressions because communication was usually face-to-face. They experienced genuine interaction and real bonds of friendship.

That is not the case anymore. Teens are connected to technology, not personal interaction. That makes authentic communication with parents difficult and often causes a breakdown in the parent/teen relationship. As a result, we don't hear or listen to the invaluable advice that they want to give us.

## Changing the Pattern with Relational Wisdom

So how do we change these patterns? With authentic **relational wisdom**.

The key principles of relational wisdom are depicted in a simple diagram, which illustrates the biblical teaching that our relationships are always three-dimensional. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are always in relationship with God, with ourselves, and with other people.

This is the foundation of a key relational principle called the **SOG plan**: people with healthy relationships are constantly seeking to be **Self-aware**, **Other-aware** and **God-aware**. Let me unpack this a bit.



- Being "**Self-aware**" means asking yourself questions like these:
  - What am I feeling? Why?
  - What am I tempted to do?
  - What are the likely consequences?
  - What could I do instead?
- Being "**Other-aware**" means asking yourself questions like these:
  - What do others seem to be feeling? Why?
  - How am I affecting them?
  - How can I serve others? Love them? Look out for their interests?
- Being "**God-aware**" means asking yourself questions like these:
  - Who is God? What is he like?
  - What could he be up to in this situation?
  - Do I trust in him or in myself?

- How can I show that I love, trust, and obey him above all things?

## Getting Personal: My Mom's Punch List Drove Me Crazy

Let's move from the theoretical to the personal as I describe how my failure to learn how to ask these kinds of questions in my teen years caused a lot of relational stress, especially with my mother.

God wired parents to be nurturers. They are divinely programmed to raise their children and prepare us for success in life. These instincts seem to be particularly strong in mothers. This was certainly true of my mother. During my last couple of years of high school, she was intensely focused on preparing me to launch into life successfully. In many ways this was a great blessing; she spurred me on in countless ways to become a responsible and disciplined person.

But there was a downside to my mother's parenting efforts. In the last few months of my senior year, my mom was acting more like a contractor who was nearly done building a new house. The last step in finishing the project is to walk through it with what's called a "**punch list**." The contractor is not focusing on all the things that are right in the building, but rather on all the things that are not yet completed perfectly. He makes notes of chipped paint, sticking doors, peeling linoleum and leaking faucets. If he is a good builder, he wants the house to be perfect when he hands the keys to the new owners.

That mindset is great for a contractor, but it can drive a teenager crazy. As my mom kept focusing on the unfinished elements of my character, we experienced a lot of conflict. I felt like I would never be able to please her, and she felt like I was stubbornly refusing to listen to what she thought was vital counsel for my success in college and in life. As a result, she was frequently frustrated with me, and I was often resentful and disrespectful toward her.

Then my dad began teaching me about relational wisdom. It all seemed rather theoretical at first, until he asked me to apply it to my relationship with my mom. When I did so, it turned my world upside down.

First, I became more **God-aware**. To be honest, I hadn't thought deeply about God's role in my relationship with my mother. Yes, I'd been taught all of the verses about obeying my father and mother, but as I approached graduation and independence, those concepts seemed less and less applicable.



But when I started applying the SOG plan to our relationship, I had to answer questions like these: “Where is God in all of this? What is he up to? What does he expect of me in relation to my mother?”

The Bible provides direct answers to those questions. God is Lord of all. He created me and saved me through the sacrifice of his Son. I owe him everything and am called to respect everything he has designed and commanded.

Romans 13:1-2 teaches that every authority in heaven and on earth is established by God. This means that my mother is a “governor” appointed by God to teach and guide me as I prepare for adulthood. Since she was appointed by God, she represents God, and he calls me to respect her as his agent in my life. Therefore, whenever I resisted her, resented her, or defied her, I was actually resisting, resenting, and defying God himself. That is big-time sin, and I was guilty of it over and over again.

I began to realize that one of the main things God was up to in my life was to teach me to submit to the authority figures he has established. I finally realized that if I could not learn to respect and value my mother's correction and guidance, I'd struggle with every other authority structure I would encounter as I moved out into the world.

Second, I became more **self-aware**. I began by identifying the emotions I felt when my mother sought to correct or counsel me. The list was embarrassingly long: frustration, anger, resentment, bitterness, hopelessness.

Then I had to ask myself, “Why do I feel this way.” At first, I wanted to blame it all on her. But as I prayed about it, I realized she was not the problem; I was. I had to face the fact that I was saturated with pride and self-righteousness. I thought I knew it all. Although I wouldn't say it out loud, in my heart I believed that I was smarter than my mother and everyone else. So, whenever she tried to counsel or correct me, my pride took over, and I became defensive and angry.

As I began to apply relational wisdom, God brought to mind a series of Bible passages that were directly on point:

- Proverbs 12:15 - “The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.”
- Proverbs 13:10 – “Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.”
- Proverbs 15:32 – “He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.”
- Psalm 141:5 - “Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it.”

As I prayed through these passages, I realized my mother was not the cause of the negative emotions I was feeling; those feelings were simply the evidence of the pride and self-righteousness that was ruling my own heart. As I confessed those sins to God and asked for his forgiveness, he graciously loosened the chains of my pride and gave me the humility to listen to my mother more willingly and value what she was trying to teach me.



As a result, I became less defensive and argumentative and began to think about the values and disciplines she was trying to pass on to me. And one day, I finally saw something I'd been blind to all along: there was not one character quality my mother was trying to teach me that I would not one day wish I had developed. So why not cooperate and build these things into my life now rather than waiting until later?

Third, God helped me to become more **other-aware** regarding my mother. This triggered some painful realizations that I had been blind to most of my life.

My mother is a smart and highly disciplined woman. She earned two degrees and was a successful teacher and counselor. She could have pursued a fulfilling and well-paying professional career, serving people who appreciated her labors. But instead, she gave up personal success to be a full-time wife, mother, homeschool teacher and family manager.

When she wakes up in the morning, the first thing she thinks about is her family. Throughout the day, she is always caring for us. She lives and breathes to guide us, feed us, look out for us and spur us on to become all that God designed us to be.

I was grieved to realize that in contrast to the many students she had taught or counseled who were grateful for her guidance, I had not given her even a fraction of the respect and appreciation she deserved for all the sacrifices she had made on my behalf. Instead of making her job a joy and delight, as Hebrews 13:17 commands, I had made it a burden and a trial for her.

As God opened my eyes to be more aware of who my mother was and all she had done for me, and how my pride and defensiveness had hurt her, I repented and sought her forgiveness. Our relationship began to change in wonderful ways. I became more grateful for who she was and how freely she served others and me. I began to listen humbly to her advice and benefit from her wisdom. We were able to laugh more and kid each other in ways we hadn't done in years.

No, it didn't suddenly become perfect. My pride and her "contractor's punch list" still clashed at times. And as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I still had a lot of growing to do when I left for college.

Even so, my last few months in high school were some of the best times my mom and I had experienced. And even though I still made mistakes when I got to college, the lessons I learned at home kept me from making even bigger mistakes.

In short, I've learned that God's promise in Ephesians 6:1-2 is true: as I became respectful of my mother's God-given role in my life, it began to go better for me ... and, more importantly, for her.

In fact, we've come full circle. After graduating from college, I accepted a position with the ministry my father and mother lead, so we are now working side by side every day ... and I love it!

## What about you?

What kind of maturity do you have at this point in your life? Is it genuine or artificial? Have you simply acquired a lot of information, or are you learning to apply that knowledge through real life experience and personal responsibility?

One of the best ways to test your knowledge and maturity is to examine your relationships, especially with your parents. Are your relationships genuine? Do they last? Do they bless others? To put it in terms of relational wisdom, are you learning to be God-aware, Self-aware, and Other-aware?

If you want to overcome artificial maturity and learn how to develop deep, authentic relationships with both God and the people around you, you need a strong, Christ-centered foundation. Prayerfully identify your character weaknesses, understand the difference between simple knowledge and true wisdom, be humble and seek counsel, find godly mentors and challenge yourself to grow. Let me suggest five simple steps that will aid this process:

- 1) **Develop a hunger and passion for God's Word.** Sit under solid teaching every week and spend time in the Bible every day. That's the primary way that God will speak to you, teach you, correct you and guide you in true wisdom and knowledge.
- 2) **Listen to your parents.** They are God's chief human channel of wisdom into your life. They love you more than anyone else in this world and have sacrificed greatly to launch you into life. They have a huge concern for and investment in your success. Learn from them. Honor them. Respect them. As God promises in Ephesians 6:1-2, it will go well for you!
- 3) **Subscribe to RW360's blog** to receive [weekly tips](#) on how to develop and apply relational wisdom in your daily life. Then practice principles like **SOG plan** at home, with friends at school and at work. Pray every day that God will make you more self-aware, other-aware, and God aware.
- 4) **Read edifying books** about spiritual and relational growth, such as those listed in the [recommended reading](#) section of our ministry's website. The more you learn and put into practice before you leave your home, the better off you will be.
- 5) **Pursue online training through the RW Academy.** [Discovering Relational Wisdom](#) is designed to help you improve your relational skills, build lasting relationships, and increase your ability to prevent and resolve conflict. [Numerous articles](#) show that improving relational skills is one of the most effective ways to prepare for the challenges of college life and make college an enjoyable and successful experience. Relational skills are a key factor in building close and lasting friendships during and after college, improving academic achievement, enhancing a resume, strengthening future job performance, teamwork and career advancement and experiencing a fulfilling, life-long marriage.



More and more employers are becoming aware of the way these types of skills make their employees more productive and their businesses more profitable, so adding a "Certificate in Relational Wisdom: Enhanced Emotional Intelligence" to your resume can make you more attractive to future employers, give you an advantage over competing applicants and may help you to land your dream job.

- 6) Students may use coupon **student50** for an automatic 50% discount on the \$49 registration fee.

## Coming Full Circle

Even though I began to focus deliberately on learning relational wisdom before leaving home, my growth was not as far along as I wish it had been. Therefore, I still suffered from "artificial maturity" more than I realized. As mentioned earlier, that immaturity had a steep price, both financially and relationally.

I'm thankful that God was willing to forgive my failures and now gives me new opportunities every day to get it right. As I learn from my past mistakes and deliberately seek to deepen my relational skills, he has graciously blessed me in more ways than I would have imagined.

God helped me to develop better friendships and greater discipline and focus during my remaining years at college. I completed a business and marketing degree while working thirty hours a week. I served at a ministry that is committed to helping other people improve their relational skills. Best of all, God brought a wonderful woman into my life and is giving us the joy of raising a precious little boy.

I doubt any of that would have happened had I not experienced the consequences of my artificial maturity. I was simply too proud to see my immaturity until God opened my eyes through those painful events. It was an unpleasant way to learn, but the Lord has taken the "ashes" of my artificial maturity and made something beautiful from them in every area of my life. I am so thankful for his grace!

I encourage you not to wait as long as I did to pursue relational wisdom. Learn from my mistakes and spare yourself from the consequences of artificial immaturity. As Proverbs 4:7-8 promises,

***"Get wisdom...prize her highly, and she will exalt you."***

~ Jeff Sande

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