

The Value of Listening to Your Life

Knowledge of Self and the Knowledge of God

Excerpt from The Gift of Being Yourself, by David Benner

Christian spirituality involves a transformation of the self that occurs only when God and self are both deeply known.....Leaving the self out of Christian spirituality results in a spirituality that is not well grounded in experience. It is, therefore, not well grounded in reality. Focusing on God while failing to know ourselves deeply may produce an external form of piety, but it will always leave a gap between appearance and reality. This is dangerous to the soul of anyone – and in spiritual leaders it can also be disastrous for those they lead.

Consider the way a lack of self-knowledge affected the life of a well-known pastor and his congregation. No one would have doubted this man's knowing of God – at least before his very public downfall. He had built a very successful ministry around his preaching, and there was no reason to suspect that he did not personally know the truths he publicly proclaimed. Nor was there any obvious reason to question his knowing of himself. Anyone who thought about the matter would probably have judged his self-understanding to be deep. His sermons often included significant self-disclosure, and he seemed to know how to be vulnerable before God.

But as for many of us, all of that was more appearance than reality. The self this pastor showed to the world was a public self he had crafted with great care – a false self of his own creation. Between this public self and his true experience lay an enormous chasm. Both that chasm and his inner experience lay largely outside his awareness.

Suddenly the gap between his inner reality and external appearance was exposed. Things that he did not know or accept about himself welled up within him and shattered the illusion his life represented. Lust led to sexual involvement with a woman he was counseling, just as greed had earlier led to mis-use of church funds. As these things became public, the lie that was his life imploded. It was a lie he had lived before his family, closest friends, congregation, God and himself. It was a lie that grew from the soil of self-ignorance.

There is no need to identify this man, nor even to give him a fictitious name. His story is all too familiar. He reminds us of Jesus' teaching about the dangers of the blind leading the blind (Matthew 15:14) -- both easily falling into a pit of pain and despair. Just how serious is this? According to Jesus, it is better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone about your neck than to cause not just one, but thousands to stumble and leave them with devastating wounds.

This man was not short on knowledge about either himself or God. But none of it did him any good. None of it was worthy of being called *transformational knowing*.

Not all knowledge transforms. Some merely puffs us up like an overfilled balloon. And you know what happens to overfilled balloons!

Actor and filmmaker Woody Allen often speaks publicly of his decades in psychoanalysis -- three or four sessions per week on a couch, saying whatever came into his mind, allowing his analyst's periodic interpretations of the meaning of these free associations to guide his exploration. However, there is little evidence that Allen's self-knowledge has brought him freedom or psychological health. In fact, making his continuing neurotic struggles the hallmark of his public character, he often focuses his sardonic humor on the limits of self-understanding as a means of change.

Self-knowledge that is pursued apart from knowing our identity in relationship to God easily leads to self-inflation. This is the puffed-up, grandiose self Paul warns about (I Corinthians 8:1) -- an arrogance to which we are vulnerable when knowledge is valued more than love. It can also lead to self-preoccupation. Unless we spend as much time looking at God as we spend looking at our self, our knowing of our self will simply draw us further and further into an abyss of self-fixation.

But it also quite possible to be stuffed with knowledge about God that does nothing to help us genuinely know either God or self. Having information about God is no more transformational than having information about love. Theories and ideas about God can sit in sturdy storage canisters in our mind and do absolutely no good. If you doubt this, recall Jesus' harsh words for the religious leaders of his day who knew God's law but did not know God's heart.

The pastor whose story I just told had a great deal of information about God. He also seemed to know lots of things about himself. But this knowledge was all objective, not personal. It was therefore, relatively useless to him.

He told me, for example, that he knew God is forgiving. but he had never really experienced this forgiveness, at least not in relation to any significant failure. It would be more accurate to say that he *believed* God is forgiving but did not *know* this as an experiential truth. Living the lie of his pretend self, he had always taken safe, inconsequential sins to God for forgiveness, never daring to expose the reality of his inner world to God. To do so would have required that he face this reality himself. *That* he had never been prepared to do.

He told me that his enemy was sloth – spiritual laziness. He said he had often asked God to forgive him for not working harder for the kingdom. But confession of such a sin was nothing more than a distraction. It kept his focus (and, perhaps he hoped, God's focus) off the deeper things about himself that were so profoundly disordered.

He also told me that he knew God is love. But again, this was a belief, not an experience. To truly know love, we must receive it in an undefended state – in the vulnerability of a “just as I am” encounter. This man had never been able to allow himself this degree of vulnerability with anyone – not his wife, nor his children, nor his closest friends, and certainly not God.

Not surprisingly, then, his knowledge of himself was equally superficial. Listening to the things he told me about his life was like reading a throwaway paperback novel or watching a B-grade movie. The role he was playing lacked depth and reality. It was two-dimensional. As he told me about himself he was describing someone he had been watching from a distance. The knowledge he had of this person was objective and remote. It had, therefore, no transformational value. It was simply his pitiful attempt to give flesh-and-bones reality to the falsity of his pretend self. The self he sought to project to the world was an illusion.

Even after his crisis, this man had enormous difficulty being honest. His longstanding, deeply ingrained tendency to present a pretend, idealized self survived the dissolution of both his ministry and his marriage. It wasn't so much that he told lies as that he lived them. This is the tragedy of the false self. But unfortunately, this man did not have a monopoly on falsity. It is a part of all of us, to one degree or another.

Truly transformational knowledge is always personal, never merely objective. It involves *knowing of*, not merely *knowing about*. And it is *always relational*. It grows out of a relationship to the object that is known – whether this is God or one's self.

Objective knowing can occur in relation to anything that we examine at a distance. It is knowing that is independent of us. For example, you may know that earth orbits around the sun or that Columbus arrived in the Americas in 1492 without direct personal experience of either, provided you are willing to accept the testimony of others. This is how it is with much of what we believe. Personal knowing, on the other hand, is based on experience. It is therefore subjective. I know that my wife loves me because of my experience of her. While I can describe her love to someone else, I cannot prove it. I cannot make it objective. Yet this does not detract from the validity of my knowing.

Because personal knowing is based on experience, it requires that we be open to the experience. Knowing God's love demands that we receive God's love – experientially, not simply as a theory. Personal knowledge is never simply a matter of the head. Because it is rooted in experience, it is grounded in deep places in our being. The things we know from experience we know beyond belief. Such knowing is not incompatible with belief, but it is not dependent on it.

I do not merely believe that my wife loves me, I know she loves me. And as arrogant as it may sound, I can say that I do not merely believe in God, *I know God* – certainly not exhaustively, but nonetheless genuinely.

People who have never developed a deep personal knowing of God will be limited in the depth of their personal knowing of themselves. Failing to know God, they will be unable to know themselves, as God is the only context in which their being makes sense. Similarly, people who are afraid to look deeply at themselves will of course be equally afraid to look deeply at God. For such persons, ideas about God provide a substitute for direct experience of God. Knowing God and knowing self are therefore interdependent. Neither can proceed very far without the other. Paradoxically, we come to know God best not by looking at God exclusively, but by looking at God and then looking at ourselves – then looking at God, and then again looking at ourselves. This is also the

way we best come to know our selves. Both God and self are mostly fully known in relationship to each other.