

TO KNOW AS WE ARE KNOWN

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The epistemological ideal is set for Latter-day Saints scripturally: “They who dwell in his presence...see as they are seen, and know as they are known...” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:94). Our Father moves us toward this perfect knowing by imparting to us gifts or talents: “And to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 46:29). One way of looking at these gifts is as epistemological starting points in our progression towards total knowing.

For us in the scholastic world, our intellectual gifts—which we have developed mostly in academe—are usually identified by the training in our specific disciplines and narrow specialties. For example, I spoke yesterday with an older returning student who hopes to take her degree in English this December. I asked what classes she was taking during her final semester. After naming her senior-level major classes, she said with a pause and some chagrin, “And Math 108. I don’t have a math mind.” I can imagine students (and faculty) in math, science, or other areas who hate writing and say publically or privately that English is their worst subject. And so it goes.

But to paraphrase Paul’s physiological analogy to the parable of the talents, “Shall the mathematician say to the writer or the poet to the scientist, ‘I have no need of thee?’” In reality, most of us are so involved in the modes of knowing associated with our academic fields and teaching responsibilities that we give little thought to the virtues of our colleagues’ epistemologies. Nevertheless, the spirit of a community of faith and of a collegial grouping of those interested in the life of the mind implies the ideal of unity. We ought, by this ideal, to give thought not only to our own academic gifts but to those of others as well.

In the context of a university sponsored by the Lord’s Church, what does it mean to us to consider the concept of “knowing as we are known”? Of course, our Father knows perfectly, and to develop the line of thought I am proposing, God’s perfect knowing would mean that his knowing encompasses all of what we call “academic disciplines” and more. The chief implication for me is that I must set aside any sense of ascendancy about my disciple’s relationship relative to that of others.

My mode of knowing is not necessarily better than any other; rather, it is simply first for me temporally: this is where I begin. But eventually, if I continue to progress to the state where I am worthy to dwell with him, I will have to acquire, probably one by one, all modes of knowing. And surely this curriculum will include my becoming a beginner in another academic field, as I learn a new and different mode of knowing.

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To my student friend who said she did not have a math mind I offered this help, “Remember that, like the English language, math is a symbolic system for solving problems.” I don’t think she took much comfort in my suggestion. But I did. I confess that I used to be one of those “English people” who said, almost boastfully, “I don’t do math.” I have repented of this smugness. Because I have invested so heavily in learning the epistemology of the visual arts, I probably won’t get around in this life to developing my mathematical inclinations, though I long to. This change has come because I have decided to become serious, in a modest way, about the idea that as I progress in my efforts to learn by faith, I will have to acquire all avenues of learning and knowing. Why not begin with desire and sympathy and admiration of various branches on the tree of knowledge?

I believe the current spirit on this campus, the spirit of the learning model and Foundations, is very much akin to the spirit of this quest for well-rounded and far-extended knowing. In the last issue of *Perspective* (8.1) Vaun Waddell suggested that the seven liberal arts in the medieval university:

...represent seven separate manners by which individuals may achieve mental coherence, seven spiritual gifts to seven distinct character types among the children of the Heavenly Father, for each to be given the only epistemological gift by which he or she can learn for example, the principle of the redemption of the periodic chart or Greek grammar.

Vaun goes on to say, “I do not know the latent but lost epistemologies; I am speculating that they might be rediscovered at BYU–Idaho.”

In the spirit of rediscovery I accepted the suggestion from the *Perspective* editorial board to conduct interviews with six colleagues from various disciplines, the purpose being to explore ways in which each of the disciplines “knows.” In so doing I tried to discover common threads among the disciplines. Conducting these interviews filled me with renewed respect for my colleagues, their disciplines, and their ways of knowing. As I interviewed them, three common threads seemed to emerge: the way in which each discipline turns upon its own version of “text” and works at interpreting that text, the way in which each field of study in its own way not only quests for truth but hopes to render it artfully, and finally, the way in which our knowing is intertwined with our efforts to help our students know the way in which our particular discipline knows.

TEXTURE OF TEXTS

Our word “text” derives from an Indo-European root meaning “to weave; also to fabricate, especially with an axe; also to make wicker or wattle-fabric for mud covered walls.” The Greek derivative *tekne*

means “skill, art, craft.” A Latin derivative refers to a “web or net and the weaver’s beam to which threads are tied,” hence our word “textile.” Other important derivatives include “architect,” “technical,” “technology.” In other words, a text is something woven or made with art and cunning. In the context (another derivative) of the university world, “text,” as I am using it, describes that which the teacher and student study, and by extension, that which they produce in their turns.

Steve Allen suggests that the musical text contains the devices through which the composer communicates emotional intention and in which the performer can detect and render spiritual beauty and truth. For the fiction writer, Josh Allen teaches us the text is some triggering image or some human problem the verbal artist wishes to explore, and the result of that exploration is a verbal text—short story or novel—a new world with consistent but not necessarily realistic parameters which brings artful truth to readers. Thus, Josh’s story begins with the human problem of, “What would happen to a marriage if one of the partners suddenly and uncharacteristically became motivated to learn in new ways?” The resultant text traces its origins to the author’s experience with human emotions and problems, and the imaginative twists the mind gives them.

In interviewing my colleagues, I came to realize that their texts seem to vary greatly: from the physical world of the naturalist (Tate Carter) to the cultural world of human society (John Ivers); from the world of problems, both practical and theoretical, which the mathematician solves with a specialized symbolic and numeric language (Jennie Youngberg) to the world of historical artifacts the historian reinterprets (Shawn Johansen). But underlying all types of texts—especially in the scholastic setting—are basic principles:

1. a textual heritage is present,
2. teacher and student explore these texts together, and
3. their exploration creates new texts.

The process of receiving, exploring, and producing texts can be called interpretation. Beyond this simple definition, of course, interpretation and its sibling hermeneutics are complex practices which I will not treat in this essay.

AESTHETIC EPISTEMOLOGY

As you know, the three pillars of classical value are the good, the true, and the beautiful. This summer on a trip to Peru with the BYU–Idaho faculty, I learned an important lesson about the relationship among these three important categories. I learned it by analogy. As I sketched during the trip, Leon Parson generously reviewed with me the basic art elements: line, shape, form, value, texture, color. The new truth he shared that meant so much to me was that “each of the elements contains within it

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all of the others.” In other words, for example, any line has shape, form, value, texture, and color. As I applied this wonderful synthesizing and expansive principle to the Greek ideals, I realized that every teacher at BYU–Idaho, consciously or not, is on a quest for beauty. We speak often of truth; our quest to apply truth to human character to be good and help our students to be good is obvious; we do not as often recognize that this process also values the beautiful above the ugly and strives for the elegant.

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Each faculty member I interviewed emphasized a different quality of what makes a beautiful text or interpretation of a text. Jennie Youngberg speaks of the elegant mathematical solution. When I asked her for an example, she offered the example, of an elegant proof of the Pythagorean theorem. As we discussed her choice, I realized that for her elegance equals simplicity and simplicity equals beauty.

Though the words “beauty, elegance, and aesthetic” did not come up in my interview with John Ivers, I’m sure he would agree that the processes of seeing and helping students see and correct the errors of fallacious cultural paradigms possesses a practical beauty. Josh Allen spoke at length about the need for the fiction writer in creating the particular laws that govern a fictional world to be true to those laws. For him the beautiful solution is consistent. The historian’s beauty, as I came to realize it in my talk with Shawn Johansen, emphasizes the quality of courage. He says, “Good history is true to the evidence. Historians must have humility to accept and account for evidence even if it does not fit their philosophy or expectations.”

Tate Carter tells the beautiful story of being on a trail ride with students, having tried to explain the sound of the bull elk’s bugle in mating season, hoping for students to have the experience of hearing it themselves. For a time they hear nothing, and then, unexpectedly and close-by, they hear the distinctive call of a huge bull bugling his maleness. For Tate and his students, beauty is natural. And finally, the musical performer’s world is the quest for beautiful rendition of a composer’s text. But, as Steve Allen reminded me, this beauty is essentially spiritual: “Like other spiritual gifts, we can’t have it until we give it away.”

TEACHING TO KNOW

I have been suggesting that in interviews about how their disciplines know, those I interviewed expanded my understanding of the nature of the texts we interact with and the essential beauty in the process of our work. A third lesson I took from these talks was the pedagogical nature of knowing: we know as we help our students to know. Because I want to be a better teacher, because this university is a teaching institution, and because our leaders have invited us to observe our colleagues teaching,

I am always on the lookout for great teaching. Perhaps most of us, with Abraham, desire “also to be one who [possesses] great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge” (Abraham 1:2).

I want to recommend my colleagues’ insights about how we know in terms to their wisdom and experience as fine teachers. I did not know that, as Shawn Johansen told me, all history majors take at least two courses in and are exposed in many others to the rigors of historical interpretation in writing. Stephen Allen spoke of getting students who have wonderfully dexterous abilities to get beyond technical skill to the spirit within themselves as it connects to the spirit within the music. Tate Carter shares the account of emails from former students who have become, at least in their roommates’ eyes, plant fanatics—people who can’t walk across campus without pausing in wonder at the manifestations of what they now know because they took his class. I can imagine students in John Ivers’ Spanish class having complex feelings about grammar only to be surprised to learn that their teacher, whom they now see primarily as he who masters Spanish verb conjugations, is in reality a wise, humorous man who also understands the complexities of their lives. I was once assigned as the non-departmental member of Jennie Youngberg’s CFS committee. Though I observed her teaching by assignment, the greater truth is that I went to her classes to learn rich new ways of teaching.

JUST KNOWING

As a result of interviewing my colleagues and synthesizing threads of their epistemologies, I examined more closely the history and nature of my epistemological choices. In thinking about how others know and having my sights set on eternal knowing, I realized that I must begin with an examination of what and how I know. Since an exhaustive history is not possible here, I focus on a little niche of realization about a kind of knowing I do not hear discussed much.

A seminal moment in my epistemological development came a year after my mission when, driving with my mother and thinking of a young lady in whom I was interested, I asked, “When will I know when I meet the woman I am to marry?” My mother answered, “You’ll just know.” As I ponder this important personal anecdote, I find it significant that my mother did not say, “You’ll figure it out,” or, “You’ll feel when it’s right,” both plausible answers.

My mother’s cryptic, quick, and wise answer has intrigued me, and I have thought much about the phrase *just knowing*. I have asked myself: “Are there certain things that I *just know*? What is their nature? Is *just knowing* a state or a process? Have I ever, following my mother’s example, told someone that they will ‘just know’? Does *just knowing* deserve a

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category parallel to the major traditional epistemological groupings: empiricism, rationalism, revelation? Is *just knowing* tantamount to intuition? Are there things that God *just knows*?”

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You can see that my questioning has compelled me to consider the relationship between *just knowing* and other epistemological categories and issues. Perhaps the closest affinity comes between *just knowing* and intuition. Speaking of intuition, philosopher Hunter Mead argues in *An Introduction to Aesthetics*:

The feeling of inner certainty is thus at the same time the most basic subjective test of truth, and the least reliable test. The best solution of this paradoxical situation appears to be this: Admittedly, there can be no truth experience unless this intuitive feeling of certainty is present, but by itself the feeling is unreliable. It must be present, but it must be well-accompanied. It is the means for certifying the other more objective criteria; it is an instrument for realizing the other tests of truth, but not a valid test when standing by itself.

In his discussion of intuition, Mead speaks of Joan of Arc’s certainty that she saw the archangel and was told by him to go and save France. And he reminds us that “the feeling of inner certainty is by itself quite unreliable, as proved by the fact that the insane are probably more ‘certain’ as to the truth of their convictions than any other group of human beings” (165). Mead leaves us with the idea that intuition “is too personal and subjective to permit much analysis.”

Mead obviously values rational analysis. Yet something deep within me (another intuition?) makes me question his skepticism of intuitive knowledge. And I think, for example, of the subjectivity of Joseph Smith’s account of the First Vision and his identification with Paul’s visionary and post-visionary experiences:

He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the persecution under heaven could not make it otherwise....So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true. (Joseph Smith History 1:24-5)

A critical element in Paul’s and Joseph Smith’s visions lies in the fact that though they report the empirical quality of their experience, the report of those experiences must be taken on faith. Their visions are not to be replicated empirically.

The faithful argue that the earnest seeker after religious truth can verify subjective truth experientially. Many of us came to testimonies of the truth of Joseph Smith’s account by reading and studying the Book of Mormon and receiving inspiration concerning its truthfulness. And years of living the principles Joseph taught further convince me and

others of his prophetic calling. I wonder if Hunter Mead would accept the principle of “by their fruits ye shall know them” as adequate supplement to his assessment to what he considers the too personal and subjective nature of intuition. Indeed, it seems to me that an epistemological sticking point is that the trust he places in epistemology and rationality seems very much like the faith he claims cannot stand alone. And if, as Mead suggests, that intuition is paradoxically both a starting and an ending point of knowing but also the method about which we should be most skeptical, who is to say what that balance and relationship are?

And yet, though I know myself to rely much and often on intuition as a foundational cornerstone to my knowing, I too am somewhat skeptical about a wholesale validation of *just knowing* as a crowning epistemology. When I think about intuition I am forced to conclude that though I often rely on it, I am not positive I can always distinguish between it and emotion, habit, desire, taste, or epistemological laziness. I do not like the skepticism I feel when I hear someone say, “I have always known the Church is true,” because I know how prone I too am to play in an area or two of my life the *just knowing* card. I am not so a-rational that I can’t detect my own hypocrisies. And maybe here’s another version of my dual desire: I want to be able to analyze how I know that I know, and I want to explore how my colleagues in other areas know how they know, but I also want to reserve the right to know without having to always follow Hunter Mead in insisting that all my *just knowing* be accompanied by verifiable epistemologies.

Because my primary field is literature, I find fictional portrayals of some of these issues are more moving to me than purely rational analysis. For example, a favorite short story, Orson Scott Card’s “Unaccompanied Sonata,” tells of Christian Haroldsden, a musical genius, whose dystopic society forces him to choose between his innately brilliant musical skill and his society’s arbitrary proscriptions against his using it universally. Repeatedly Christian chooses his inner gift, and society responds by depriving him the means to make music—first of his hands and then of his voice. Through this lifelong process Christian’s music becomes simpler and more universally appealing, though eventually he is forced completely away from music into administration. At a climactic moment an incidental character commenting on the universality and brilliance of Christian’s songs says, “It’s just that they were written by a man who knows.” To which Christian, unknown to the young man, queries “Knows what?” The boy answers, “He just knows, just knows, that’s all. Knows it all.” The boy, not himself a musical genius or even a talented musician, somehow senses through the evidence of the music the deep humanistic knowledge the songs reflect. Even Christian, who once wrote the songs, does not feel able to know what he knew at the moment of composition

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or know what he knows late in life when this young man and his friends joyously but unprofessionally perform them.

For me, the point of this illustration of *just knowing* from literature is this: a deep irony pervades any attempt to analyze *just knowing*; perhaps because by its nature it is non-analytic, it cannot be accessed in that way. Rather, perhaps it best just portrayed, illustrated, or speculated about.

I propose now a speculative possibility concerning the nature of *just knowing*. To lay the groundwork of my epistemological conjecture, I must tell of a thought I had years ago in writing my master's thesis, applying Joseph Campbell's ideas of the universal quest myth to a novel. My literary analysis was archetypal, and stemmed from Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and universal archetypes. It occurred to me that our theology provides a possible explanation for these widespread patterns in human thought and story: though we have been taught that a veil of forgetfulness is drawn across the memories of our pre-earth life, might there nevertheless be deep structures within our souls, deeper than conscious memory, that we brought with us, vestiges of pre-worldly experience unobstructed by the veil?

We are fond of quoting William Wordsworth's "Intimation Ode" because we recognize in his poetic brilliance a kinship with our theological and personal intimations of immortality:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.

Wordsworth suggests that for the youth and adult "Shades of the prison-house"—the dark realities of our world—soon crowd out the childhood sense of our heavenly origins. If our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting, archetypes may be merely dream structures from the "elsewhere" we used to call home. I am suggesting that, like archetypes, *just knowing* may be evidence of "Not in entire forgetfulness." Might *just knowing* in its best sense be some kind of epistemological deep structure brought from before, that, despite the veil of forgetfulness, remains, if often blurred, still largely intact from the pre-mortal realm? Thus, revelation in one of its forms would be the epistemological process by which heaven bypasses the veil and bridges earth and eternity; *just knowing* might be a sense of connectedness with heaven, or a type of subtle revelation where paradise seeps around both veil and mortal mental fog.

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Of course you guessed it: my mother was right. Two or three weeks after I met Shauna, I just knew and she just knew that we would be eternal partners. But ironically we did not want to acknowledge that we knew it. Following a pattern we had learned from youth, we fasted and prayed for confirmation. We received none. In fact, for most of that long autumn Sunday we were irritated with each other. We got married anyway eight months later. At least we had enough sense to know that a lack of overt revelation was not sufficient evidence in this case to negate our *just knowing* we were a couple. And years later the realization came to us why that fast was so ill-fated: in his perfect economy, God apparently wanted us to learn that we had already received our sure knowledge. We just knew. For all of Hunter Mead's insistence that intuition be accompanied by more evidence, evidently seeking further confirming revelation was uninteresting or maybe even offensive to the Spirit.

In all of this speculation I feel the deep waters of philosophical epistemology. Still, I think it safe to say that I am sure of these points—

- we should think about how we know
- we should seek revelation about how we know
- we should learn from others about how they know
- we should look deeply within ourselves

—all so we can know better and move closer to our scriptural ideal of knowing as we are known.

I conclude with a picture of two moments in my recent epistemological quest that are engraved in my soul: I asked Stephen Allen about the relationship among Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven, three composers who have moved me deeply. His wise answer, spoken by a man whose musical knowledge and skill I admire, reminded me how universal, multifaceted, and compelling is the quest for spiritual knowledge. These three composers found their distinctive ways to play emotional, intellectual, and musical strategies with and off of each other. Each is spiritually wise in his own way.

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And, at the end of Josh Allen's short story the narrator holds out to his wife a round, smooth, flat stone that he wants her to take so he can teach her how to skip it across the smooth water, a symbol of his desire to re-enter her life. He says, "I need for her to take this. Please take this." I think the world, the whole world is that stone, and I am being asked to take it and to know it. And my Father will teach me how to skip worlds of knowledge I have not yet dreamed of across the wide, sparkling universe. ∞