

Epiphany

EPIPHANY means *a manifestation, a striking appearance*. The church season of Epiphany, beginning January 6, celebrates the manifestation of the Lord to the Gentiles as per the Wise Men who traveled to find the Christ child. If you are a Gentile, this season is for you! But if you are a college student or professor, this season is for you also. I want to show this today, and enjoin you to give yourself, in your studies and teaching and scholarship, to seek epiphany.

We live in a world into which God has come and will come and does come. God came in Christ's incarnation 2000 years ago. The Lord will come again, we profess, and we long for. But I am intrigued by the third of these—God does come. I want to argue that this every-day coming occurs in our knowing. So it ought to be our paradigm for knowing. Inviting epiphany is what we are privileged to do in our studies and scholarship. It suggests a philosophy of education.

Talk of how we know whatever we know is called *epistemology*. A high-falutin' philosophical term for something as close to us as breathing and as pervasive as air. Don't forget that and check out if you hear the word.

In this time between Christ's first and second advents, Christians tend not to look for his coming. Yes, we confess the omnipresence of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit. We confess the work of Christ in our regeneration and sanctification. We confess Scripture as special revelation and creation as general revelation. Radical, earth-upending doctrines all, the sort of thing you need crash helmets for, not Easter bonnets, as author Annie Dillard says. But somehow a huge disconnect intervenes between the doctrines and our everyday orientation to knowledge and reality. We do not expect him to come now.

This, I propose, is because we have been born into the epistemic habit of presuming tacitly that knowledge is information, data, content. Information is clear and certain, to be had via an impersonal transfer of its bits by our looking or being told. Data is measurable quantities, expressible in the 1s and 0s of computers. The amassing of information we deem to be education and scholarship.

In this pervasive epistemic default, whatever we might *do* with that information is not *itself* knowledge. It is interpretation, application, packaging, etc. Things such as commitment or faith or emotion or service are not knowledge. They are add-ons, some of which we must minimize, and some of which we must prioritize. But knowledge itself is pure information. [Oh—and we never really talk about what knowledge is. This may be the first time you have ever considered it. We do not do epistemology, nor even know that it exists.]

This epistemic default is known among scholars as the modernist epistemological habit which continues to pervade Western culture. We Christians have imbibed this epistemic stance and its epistemological dualism, it appears, with a dedication worthy of unbelievers.

This approach to knowledge also reduces reality to 1s and 0s, for no categories remain to apprehend anything else. Both knowing and being are thereby denuded—pared down to two-dimensional bits. No category remains for the coming of God in the Now.

[A worldview approach, in the absence of a frontal challenge to the modernist default, loses out to it. Apart from specific epistemological therapy, worldview is understood either to be an unavoidable bias to be minimized, or pieces of information that we arbitrarily choose to head our data chains.]

Nowhere in this account is there room within knowledge for wonder, epiphany, redemption, wisdom, or God. Yes, these things can be acknowledged and valued, but they remain excised from knowledge. For knowledge is information—complete, lucid, certain information.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann stresses that modernist epistemology excludes doxology and resurrection and prophetic imagining of an alternative vision. And thus, as he and others aver, the Western Protestant church is domesticated and dying. I argue that education is dying as well. If the classroom is associated with knowledge as information, then it must be supplemented, and thereby marginalized, by application and non-cognitive activity. This is a most fundamental failure of integration *within* learning. And this defective epistemology cuts us off from reality and from ourselves. It hobbles knowledge, scholarship and education.

How may we craft an epistemology that takes the Gospel—redemptive encounter—as epistemic paradigm—that accredits and cultivates epiphany? How may we receive its ministrations to subvert the defective epistemic default we bear from birth into Western culture, and reorient our posture as knowers? And how may we enact this in our scholarship and philosophy of education?

The word, “epiphany,” is “a sudden realization: a sudden intuitive leap of understanding, especially through an ordinary but striking occurrence; It is an appearance of God...” Thus far the lowly search engine, Bing. And the lowly Wikipedia adds, the term “can apply in any situation in which an enlightening realization allows a problem or situation to be understood from a new and deeper perspective. Epiphanies are studied by psychologists and other scholars, particularly those attempting to study the process of innovation.”

Epiphany is *insight*, a break-through that breaks in. The widely used term carries an implicit corollary. Whatever effort we have responsibly exercised to attain insight, no matter how arduous, falls short of guaranteeing its coming. Insight comes from beyond us as a gift. It is a gracious manifestation, a self-disclosure of the real.

A related corollary: the knower wooing insight is partly in the dark regarding what it is that will come. To know, in a deepening insight, is to realize joyfully that you have been transformatively one-upped.

Consider the Magi. For years they had bound themselves to study what they half-understood. They studied the planets and stars, yes, for the planets themselves, but for themselves because in hope of deeper meaning. They were not “collecting data,” building a bank of comprehensive information. They attended to the stars, we may surmise, in loving and wondering search for wisdom—wisdom of the sort that comes to expression in a harrowing journey beyond Arabia, across trackless wastes, across tense racial and political boundaries, into the unknown to find a foreign king to whom they deemed a certain star to belong, a king worth worshipping with their best gifts—treasures themselves fraught with portent. They bound themselves covenantally, in their growing expertise, to invite its graced manifestation of deeper meaning; they bound themselves to that half-understood manifestation in taking up such a journey. What they actually found lends a surprising, transforming substance to their half-understood words as reality swept in and swept them up. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced.

A fresh epistemic paradigm starts to emerge, an account of knowing in which the redemptive encounter is accorded its rightfully central place, in which epiphany, insight, takes center stage.

In fact, we do experience this, even though we have not accorded it its rightful place at the core of our epistemology. It is unavoidably human, and it accords deeply with being, being that is God and all that he sustains by the word of His power.

Take any instance of coming to know. How do we ever come to be able to ride a bike, or read a book? For when you look AT the information, it is actually opaque, occluding the very thing you want to do. You come at the bike or the words (assuming you can even recall when you first did these), and at first even in the presence of the counsel of an authoritative guide, the information of it is opaque and meaningless, bits disconnected from each other and from you. That state, my friends, accords with the defective epistemic presumption that knowledge is information. I remember thinking, how can anybody keep their balance on two points???? I remember thinking, whenever I focused on, say, the letter *s*, it was the most ridiculous thing I ever saw, and made the most arbitrary and silly sound. SSSSSS...like a snake, or a teakettle!

In the face of that cluelessness, you nevertheless persist, longing, loving in order to grasp and understand. It's as if you cry out, cry out of your need, to invite the inbreaking of what is in no way accessible in linear fashion when you focus on the bits. You endeavor to give yourself to, to indwell, the bits, clinging to the half-understood words of a guide, submitting to journey in the half dark, following what you long for but do not yet understand or apprehend. To employ Michael Polanyi's terminology, you are striving to shift your manner of relating to the particulars from focal awareness to relying on them subsidiarily as clues to integrate to a profounder pattern. The shift that comes is the moment of insight, the aha moment. Epiphany. According to Polanyi, all knowing, whatever the field, from science to the arts, from business to Bible study, works the same way.

So, for example, when you are reading, you rely *subsidiarily* on the marks on the page, not focally. You integrate from them to their meaning. When you bike, your felt body sense of balancing is subsidiary. Your *focus* is (had better be) on getting where you are going.

The act of coming to know—the epistemic act—is not the passive transferral of explicit information from one mind to another. It is not so much information as it is *transformation*. The moment of insight transforms whatever we were struggling to indwell, curiously relativizing it even as it renders it preciously meaningful. Even the words we were saying, along with our own selves, get graciously, wonderfully, altered in the encounter.

In the moment of epiphany, we can sense rightly that we have been visited by God. The creational Word of God, the moment-by-moment let-there-be of every atom in every instant, is as living and dynamic as the Words of Scripture. And God and his Word cannot be separated. It is God’s self *revelation*. Reality just is what transforms you.

This epistemology accords with being, radically reshaping how we see it. Reality itself no longer is abstractly revisioned into two-dimensional ones and zeros. Reality is gift, as theologian Philip Rolnick and others aver.¹ Reality comes in newness, akin to the descent of God. Reverend John Ames, in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, says, “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see.”²

Epiphany thus prototypes and signposts the gracious descent of God. To know him is to be known by him. It is also to know ourselves and the world, together with others in pilgrimage with whom we are convivially, covenantally, bound. Knowing on this paradigm is fraught with the sweet intimacy of abiding together in Christ.

According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Greeks learn in order to comprehend; the Hebrews learn in order to be apprehended.” Learning is an expectant orientation toward the gift of being, a posture of self-giving love and hope. We position ourselves in the pregnant dark of not-yet-understanding, lamps trimmed, to invite and await the transformative apprehending of epiphany. We journey toward it, following a star of dimly understood significance.

Forging a philosophy of education requires doing epistemology, and this epistemology suggests one. Our best efforts to know are thus those which humbly *invite the real*, embracing the risk of its gracious incursion. We may employ epistemological etiquette—good epistemic practice—to invite the real. The following are five good epistemic practices. First and foremost is *love*. We do not know in order to love; rather, we love in order to know. We promise to love, honor and obey

¹ Phillip Rolnick, *Person, Grace, and God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

² Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Picador, 2006) 245.

so as to invite the gracious self-disclosure of the other. As Annie Dillard says, it is the lover who sees.³

Second, *composure*. We compose ourselves as knowers. In fact, we grow as knowers as we are known by the real in its gracious inbreaking. Every little aha! moment grows us, and we become better at knowing. Robert Pirsig, in his hippie-era classic, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, argues that the main ingredient it takes to fix a motorcycle is...peace of mind. That's composure!

Third, *comportment*. Comportment involves binding yourself covenantally to live life on the terms of the yet-to-be-known. It involves exercising trust, obedience, humility, and patience in advance of our understanding. It involves something like hospitable welcome, according to literature scholar George Steiner.⁴ Why would reality disclose itself to indifference, suspicion, or dismissive critique?

Fourth, *strategy*. We must put ourselves in the place where insight is likely to come. We must exercise a noticing regard that confers dignity on the yet-to-be-known. We must delight; delight, says David Bentley Hart, is the premise of any sound Christian epistemology.⁵ We must listen indwellingly, trying to get inside the thing we are trying to understand. Nobel Prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock has said that her best epistemic practice involved listening to the ear of corn, having a feeling for the organism.⁶

Finally, *communion*. The goal of our knowing is itself a best epistemic practice. Our epistemic goal is communion, friendship with God and his world. Thus the Lord's Supper, reenacting our redemptive encounter with Christ, additionally becomes great schooling for inviting the real.

I may be the only professor who likes to teach in the dungeon in Old Main—properly labeled OMB001. It is dim and low and dank and plain and unloved and unlovely. And you should be in there when the heat comes on in Old Main. The clanking far outranks that of the chains of Marley's Ghost. Yet I and some of my students deeply cherish that room, where we have struggled together to invite insight, to give ourselves to the reality we only dimly understand. The breathtaking color of repeated epiphanies of understanding, transpiring among us, more and more spangle those humble whitewashed walls. That space is dear, for God has come again and again. Every aha! is his descent, and binds knower and known together more deeply, moving us together to profounder being.

³ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: HarperCollins, 1974; Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967.

⁴ George Steiner, *Real Presences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

⁵ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 253.

⁶ Referenced by Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

Redemption—the gracious, reality-changing, descent of God in redemptive encounter—
epiphany—our eye-opening grace-spawned insight—in a world where God comes NOW, should
be the paradigm of knowing.

So. With the beginning of this semester, put yourself into the shoes of the Magi. Give yourself in
love in order to journey toward and invite the real, to invite the transforming manifestation of
God. Let epiphany shape your epistemology, your pedagogy, your studies. In the bleak mid-
winter and beyond, give him your heart, trim your lamps, mount your camels in the pregnant
dark. And don't forget your crash helmets.