



Unknowing

Jennifer Kavanagh

It was 2002, and I was writing the end of my first book. As I wrote about my intention to let go of a settled home, the sculptor Antony Gormley was being interviewed on the radio. To my astonishment I heard him speak of what I was writing. I heard him refer to “the profound experience of unknowing”. In my book I quoted what he’d said, then added, “I wish to embrace my unknowing”.

Fourteen years and seven books later, I am finally addressing a subject that is central to my life and faith.

The word “unknowing” is familiar to us from the anonymous Christian fourteenth-century text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but the concept has its roots in the earlier and influential Dionysius the Areopagite, and in the austere spirituality of the fourth-century Desert Fathers and Mothers. It is at the heart of what is called the *via negativa*, an approach to God through emptiness, through a stripping away of concepts or images, through an acceptance of the fallibility of the ego-driven life.

Knowing

All the emphasis of modern life is on the rational acquisition of factual knowledge. Facts are a mainstay of our understanding of the world. Ignorance, not knowing, is uncomfortable; we feel it puts us at a disadvantage. We have such a need to find out, such a hungry need to know. Certainty is a comfortable position. In religion, in all aspects of life, we like to stand on firm ground. But even on subjects where we feel secure, our certainties are continually challenged: by the limitations of the current state of knowledge, the subjective nature of experience, and what scientists now tell us is the fluid quality of the material world.

We also seem to think that we know what is going to happen. We confidently make plans and continue blindly according to our expectations, but unexpected occurrences often dash our preconceptions. Whether we see these intervening life events as caused by chance, destiny, an interventionist God or the working of the universe, there’s no denying that they occur.

To know is not a simple act. In other languages there are separate words to suggest different ways of knowing. In French, for instance, *savoir* is used to indicate knowledge of facts; *connaître* means to know in a deeper way: to be acquainted with a person or a place. Knowing in this latter sense is an act not merely of the brain but indicates an experience that might take place on many levels. But can we say that we actually know anyone else? Even our life partner? Do we know ourselves? If we don’t know those whom we encounter with our minds and senses, nor ourselves with whom we live all the time, how can we expect to know something beyond ourselves? How can we know the ultimate mystery? Any attempt to define or describe God is to distort, to impose our own limitations of time and space. We can only describe our own experiences thus far.

And those are experiences that don’t lend themselves to rational explanation.

Unknowing

Unknowing should not be confused with doubt (though the two may co-exist). Unknowing is a not knowing of what, how or why, but it may co-exist with a firm knowledge *that!* We may know from experience that something exists, but have no idea how to explain its nature. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* acknowledges this state:

By “darkness” I mean “a lack of knowing” - just as anything that you do not know or may have forgotten may be said to be “dark” to you, for you cannot see it with your inner eye. For this reason, it is called “a cloud”, not of the sky, of course, but “of unknowing”, a cloud of unknowing between you and your God.

The use of the word “dark” is interesting. It continues to be used colloquially, as in “I’m in the dark”, but in “dark matter” and “dark energy” it is used too to describe the vast tracts of the universe that are not yet understood. As Oliver Robinson writes in a work in progress, “Science is now being forced to accept that great swathes of reality are beyond its reach, at least for now. It has bumped into the transcendent, and called anything to do with it “dark”.

Yes, in many ways we are “in the dark”: we need to acknowledge the limitations of our cognitive knowledge. But to the mystic, indeed to any seeker after religious truth, there is another reality and another, intuitive, way of knowing. Most mystical experiences, as William James describes in his seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, have in general four common qualities, one of which is that they are “ineffable”, that is, they cannot be described; and another, paradoxically, that they are “noetic”: that they bear an intrinsic quality of knowing.

The *Cloud* author admits that both the process and the aim are clouded in mystery: “It is not your will or desire that moves you,” he writes, “but something you are completely ignorant of stirring you to will and desire you know not what.”

How can we penetrate such mystery to embrace a condition of unknowing? We cannot make it happen: it comes to us through grace. Our only responsibility is to prepare, to be ready and willing to open ourselves to what might come. If we give time to meditation, prayer, periods of silence and other forms of spiritual practice, we will give ourselves a chance. In our busy, preoccupied lives, there needs to enter a little pause, a breath; there needs to develop a more spacious consciousness, and a willingness to connect with that that is. It is only when we let go of our dependence on cognitive reasoning, when we trust our experience and inner rather than outward certainty, that we are able to access this different, intuitive, quality.

But unknowing is not just a state, but a way.

The Cloud of Unknowing

Unknowing as a way

We need to let go of assumptions about what is going to happen, and admit that “life often gets in the way”; to acknowledge that the unpredicted occurs, and is often so much richer than our expectations. Daily life demands that we make plans of some sort, but we can do so in an open and flexible way, admitting of the possibility that something unexpected may happen. Acceptance that this is the reality allows us to go forward in faith, and trust that we will be shown what to do.

It isn't easy. We are making ourselves vulnerable. We are opening ourselves to a place of risk and unpredictability - but also to a place of infinite possibility. If we can loosen the ties of habit, let go of routine, comfort blankets and addictive patterns, who knows what might emerge?

I have practised walking meditation for some years, walking slowly, meditatively, being aware of each part of my foot as it touches the ground. But only when I discovered a version given by Thich Nhat Hanh did the practice expand into meaningfulness. It begins:

Walk without a destination. Wander aimlessly without arriving, being somewhere rather than going somewhere.

Allowing my feet to take me where they will, allowing the body to take over, has been a revelation. And so it can be in the rest of life. If we allow randomness a place in our lives; have, for instance, a day without a plan, walk without a map, without a watch, open ourselves to unforeseen possibilities: that is a challenge that can bring riches.

But what about action in the world? If we start from a premise that we do not/cannot know everything that will happen, how do we move forward, how do we make decisions? Many years ago, after many decades of priding myself on my decisiveness, I was surprised, no, overwhelmed, to find myself in a different place. I found that the way forward was not a question of making decisions, but of allowing things to unfold, realising that matters would become clear. It was not a cerebral understanding, but an understanding reached, as in most spiritual development, in the act itself. Realising that I needed to give up the career of some thirty years, and with preparation to safeguard my clients, I sold my business. I had no idea of what I would do, *and it didn't matter*. This first experience of letting go was one of the most influential events in my spiritual life. Why did it take me so long to understand that this was the way to live? I became aware - it became clear - that I no longer needed to know. I would be guided; it would be shown.

In moving forward, we supply the intention, and then look for confirmation, which may come in many forms: sometimes from a phone call, a newspaper cutting or a suggestion from another. These events, incidents and material assistance are often called synchronicity - seeming coincidences which are glimpses of an existing connection, hitherto unnoticed. The more open we are, the more these seem to appear. Synchronicity, said a friend, is “a conspiracy of grace”. Or, as Einstein put it, “Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous.”

This is particularly evident when we find ourselves in a time of transition. We will often find that we have to wait for clarity. We are an impatient species, and the Spirit's time is often not our own.

Judy Clinton has written of this state,

If we act too quickly out of our fear of being in “don't know” we only superimpose on our lives that which we have already known. If we can have the courage to stay in the not knowing state a new reality will come up out of the circumstances within which we find ourselves.

If we have the courage, we can learn to live with unknowing, to live, as the American Quaker Thomas Kelly wrote, as if we are “walking with a smile into the dark”.

Contemplation

As we move into the realm of the heart and open it, as we give ourselves over to a place of ultimate vulnerability and trust, we find ourselves in a state from which a deeper knowing arises.

But the *Cloud* author asks us to go further: not just to acknowledge our ignorance, but actively to “un-know”: to strip ourselves of all our sensory experience, even any previous experience or concept of God, even the awareness of our own existence, under what he calls “a Cloud of Forgetting”. Only when the heart and will are focused entirely on a desire for God will transformation be possible. As he says, “By love he can be caught and held, but by thinking never.”

Few of us will attain such a continuous contemplative state, but we may catch an occasional glimpse. We need to move beyond the small world of personal preoccupation and be willing to connect to the life-force and the mystery of the universe. And that takes practice. We need to spend time away from our habitual actions and the tyranny of our thinking mind. In celebration, in awe, in joy at what is, we are stilled. If a glimpse, an insight, occurs, that's a bonus. We can't make it happen but in that wordless space, there might form a sense of presence.

It is only by creating a space in which anything can happen that we allow God to speak, allow the unpredictable Spirit to bring us gifts beyond our imaginings. Without that space, we are wedded to our habitual expectations and busyness, our ego-enhancing preoccupations. We can't hear; we can't listen. “God”, says Abhishiktanada, “dwells only where man steps back to give him room”. Unknowing is at the centre of spiritual life.

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