



*Expanded  
Edition*

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*Foreword by M. BASIL PENNINGTON*

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THE GIFT OF  
BEING YOURSELF

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*The Sacred Call to Self Discovery*



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## Transformational Knowing of Self and God



*I*n the epigraph that opens this book, Thomas Merton tells us what he considers the most important thing in the whole world—that on which his entire existence, happiness and peace depend. What would you identify as the most important thing for your existence and well-being? How do you think most Christians you know would answer the question?

Many Christians I know would answer with two words: “Finding God.” Others might use the language of knowing, loving and serving God. Some would include the church or relationships with other people in their answer. However they would express it, I suspect that most Christians would say something about God but would not make any reference to self.

To suggest that knowing God plays an important role in Christian spirituality will not surprise anyone. To suggest that knowing self plays an equally important role will set off warning bells for many people—being perhaps just the sort of thing you might expect from an author who is a psychologist, not a theologian.

Yet an understanding of the interdependence of knowing self

and God has held a lasting and respected place in Christian theology. Thomas à Kempis argued that “a humble self-knowledge is a surer way to God than a search after deep learning,”<sup>1</sup> and Augustine’s prayer was “Grant, Lord, that I may know myself that I may know thee.”<sup>2</sup> These are but a small sample of the vast number of theologians who have held this position since the earliest days of the church.

Christian spirituality involves a transformation of the self that occurs only when God and self are both deeply known. Both, therefore, have an important place in Christian spirituality. There is no deep knowing of God without a deep knowing of self, and no deep knowing of self without a deep knowing of God. John Calvin wrote, “Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in these two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

Though there has never been any serious theological quarrel with this ancient Christian understanding, it has been largely forgotten by the contemporary church. We have focused on knowing God and tended to ignore knowing ourselves. The consequences have often been grievous—marriages betrayed, families destroyed, ministries shipwrecked and endless numbers of people damaged.

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 misuse 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 one person to stumble in such a manner (Matthew 18:6). This pastor, and many others like him, have caused not just one but thousands to stumble and left them with devastating wounds.

## **KNOWLEDGE THAT FILLS**

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 (1 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 is 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.

### KNOWLEDGE THAT TRANSFORMS

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.

### **PETER'S TRANSFORMATIONAL KNOWING**

To illustrate how this unfolds, consider the spiritual journey of Peter. The rock on which Christ promised to build his church was remarkably crumbly. But none of the disciples showed more growth in understanding of both self and God during the three years of accompanying Christ.

Let us look in on Peter's inner knowing at several points on this journey. The first of these is his initial meeting of Christ and Christ's call to follow him. What might we assume that Peter knew about himself and God at this point?

Andrew, Peter's brother, met Jesus first, right away accepting the invitation to follow him. Andrew then went to Peter, told him that he had found the Messiah and brought Peter to Jesus to see for himself. Peter's response was the same as that of his brother—he

immediately left his fishing nets to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:18–22). From this account it seems safe to assume that Peter accepted Jesus as the Messiah. If so, we could say that he believed that Jesus was the long-hoped-for deliverer from the oppression of the Romans. At this point this knowing was a belief—a hope based on the conviction of his brother and his own brief contact with Jesus.

But what might he have known about himself? I am speculating, of course, but perhaps if asked about himself he might have told us that he was a fisherman. Possibly, he might have added that he was somewhat hot-tempered and impulsive. And perhaps he would have told us about his longing for a savior for his people—and this would show that he was a man of hope and faith. It is, however, highly unlikely that he could have known the depths of his fears or the magnitude of his pride. These levels of knowing of self awaited deeper knowing of God.

Moving ahead to his encounter with Jesus walking on the water (Matthew 14:22–33), it seems reasonable to assume that by now Peter's belief that Jesus was the Christ would have been even more solid. Peter had witnessed Jesus' numerous miracles, had heard him preach to large crowds and dialogue with individuals, and had had opportunity to watch him closely.

But on this night, Peter was not thinking about any of this. Out in a boat in the midst of a severe storm, Peter and the other disciples were preoccupied with their immediate safety. Suddenly seeing Jesus walking on the water toward them, they were terrified.

Jesus' words to them must have been instantly reassuring: "Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid."

Peter immediately cried out in response, "If it is you, tell me to come to you across the water."

Christ invited him to step out of the boat and come to him, and Peter did just that.

If asked what he now knew of God after this experience, Peter

might tell of his increasing conviction that Jesus was indeed the Christ. He might also speak of his developing hope based on witnessing Christ's miracles. He might say that he felt reassured in knowing that God had heard the prayers of his people and had at last sent their Redeemer.

Asked what he knew of himself, he might be able now to speak of his fears. While he had the courage to step out on the waters at Christ's bidding, he also experienced the terror of beginning to sink when he looked at the waves rather than Christ. But—he would likely quickly add—this had only served to increase his trust in Christ.

Jumping ahead to Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet (John 13), we see Peter's initial refusal to allow Christ to wash his feet followed by Christ's prediction of Peter's betrayal. What might Peter have said of his knowing of God and self at this point?

It seems probable that Peter might now speak with confidence about his love of Jesus, the fervency of his belief that Jesus was the Christ, and his utter disbelief and shock at Jesus' prediction of his impending denial of him. This matter of the denial must have left him profoundly puzzled. It must have been inconceivable to him that he could ever deny Jesus. Did Jesus not know the depths of his love? Did he not know of his heroic courage and the strength of his convictions? He must have assumed that Christ was mistaken in this prediction. Doubting Jesus was easier than doubting himself. He had not yet encountered either his pride or the extent of his fear.

Briefly looking in on Peter after his denial of Christ (John 18:15-27), we would probably find him self-absorbed in regret and anguish. In a moment he had been confronted by his lack of courage, his treasonous lack of loyalty and the depths of his fears. He might also be thinking about how easily his pride had been wounded by Jesus' prediction of his denial. Perhaps he was also remembering his protestation that "even if all lose faith, I will not" (Mark 14:29).

In short, he had encountered his weakest and most despicable self, and he was likely filled with self-loathing.

Finally, what can we say about Peter's knowing of himself and God at the point of his encounter with the risen Christ (John 21:15-25)? After the death of Christ, Peter and a number of the other disciples had gone back to fishing. What else was left? After a night of catching absolutely nothing, they met an unknown person on the shore in the early dawn, a man who asked about their catch and encouraged them to try casting the net on the other side of the boat. Immediately their nets were filled to overflowing with fish. And immediately they recognized their Lord. Peter quickly leaped overboard and began swimming toward shore.

Mirroring the pattern of his denials, Jesus asked him three times if he loved him more than the other disciples. This gave Peter three chances to declare his love—one for each denial. Jesus' response was to repeat his invitation for Peter to follow him (John 21:19), precisely the same invitation that had begun their relationship.

What might Peter tell us at this point about his knowing of God and himself? I suspect he would have first said how little he had truly known either himself or Jesus prior to this. With regard to Jesus, I suspect he would repeat with amazement how forgiving Jesus was. What he had known as objective information from witnessing Jesus' encounters with others, he now knew deeply and personally. And I am sure he would have spoken of his new level of readiness to follow the Christ whom he now knew in his heart, not just his mind.

The interweaving of the deepening knowledge of self and God that we have seen in Peter's experience illustrates the way genuine knowing of God and self occurs. Peter could not truly know Jesus apart from knowing himself in relation to Jesus. He did not know himself until Jesus showed him who he was. But in learning about himself, he also came to truly know Jesus.

Deep knowing of God and deep knowing of self always develop interactively. The result is the authentic transformation of the self that is at the core of Christian spirituality.

### THE DIVINE INVITATION

What have you learned about yourself as a result of your experience with God? And what do you know about God as a result of genuine encounter with your self?

The first thing many Christians would say they know about themselves as a result of their relationship with God is their sinfulness. And quite possibly the first thing they would say they learned about God from this was God's forgiveness and love. These are important things to know, and I will have more to say about them in future chapters. But what else do you know about yourself and God that has arisen from your encounter with the Divine?

While many of us have followed Jesus for much longer than the three years we have tracked in Peter's journey, too often we have not allowed the initial introduction to deepen into a deep, intimate knowing. Though we glibly talk about a personal relationship with God, many of us know God less well than we know our casual acquaintances. Too easily we have settled for knowing *about* God. Too easily our actual relationship with God is remarkably superficial. Is it any surprise, then, that we haven't learned very much about our self as a result of this encounter?

If this is your experience, don't allow yourself to be distracted by guilt. Hear God's call to a deep personal encounter as an invitation, not a reprimand. It is an invitation to step out of the security of your boat and meet Jesus in the vulnerability and chaos of your inner storms. It is an invitation to move beyond objective knowledge to personal knowing. It is an invitation to truly know God.

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