There is only one question: how to love this world. ~Mary Oliver

“. . . let yourself be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you truly love.” ~Rumi

A Reflection on Self-Knowledge and Self-Awareness:
What does self-knowledge and self-awareness mean for individuals and congregations?

By: Dr. W. Craig Gilliam

There’s a lot of fear connected with the inner journey because it penetrates our illusions. Taking the inner journey will lead you into some very shadowy places. You’re going to learn things about yourself that you’d wish you didn’t know. There are monsters in there—monsters you can’t control—but trying to keep them hidden will only give them greater power.

~Parker Palmer

Jesus said, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.’ This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.”


Self-knowledge, knowing thyself and self-awareness—what do we mean when we use these concepts for individuals and congregations? Can we really know ourselves? If so, what do people and congregations who know themselves or are self-aware look like? What is their way of being, belonging and functioning in the world? This reflection will explore these questions of self-knowledge or self-awareness as we look at ourselves as individuals and the religious communities to which we belong.

We talk about self-awareness and becoming more conscious as individuals. We often frame it as part of the spiritual journey. Years ago, I intentionally set out on that journey into Self as a spiritual practice by exploring my unconscious through psychoanalysis. I would meet with a Jungian analyst monthly. My psyche and experiences were the laboratory or classroom. We explored dreams, active imagination, my encounters with others in community life and other ways the personal shadow and the universal, collective world of archetypes reveal themselves. While frightening, it was enlightening. The more I came to know, the less I realized I knew. The stranger I was meeting on this inner journey was myself.
This inner work with the unconscious was how I discovered my love of reading and writing poetry. To me, poetry is an ancient language of the mother tongue, our soul's language.

We also invite congregations to a responsible place of self-knowing, of becoming more conscious of self, of self-awareness. To congregations, we ask questions such as Who are you? What is the future God is calling you to create? With whom are you being called to create that future? How do you agree to be together as you find your way forward? In asking these questions, we are inviting the congregation to a level of self-awareness or self-knowledge. Part of self-knowledge is about knowing who and where they are; their patterns, tendencies and horizons?

Because congregations are more than the sum of their individual parts, we as ministers invite people and the collective system to look in the mirror as we model for them through our doing the same. This invitation to self-awareness is not an obsessive, unhealthy focus on oneself or one’s community, but a fierce, courageous, honest attentiveness to one’s individual and community’s abiding character. Through intentional questions, we invite them into a vortex of self and group reflection. At its deepest level, we are inviting individuals and congregations to a place of self-knowledge, for so often, in a world of 10,000 things, we lose touch with ourselves, who we are, whose we are, the horizons toward which we cast our eyes, why we are here as individuals and communities and the paths we are called to journey.

From scripture, we know that we can be enigmatic figures, sometimes acting out of ignorance, a lack of self-awareness and in unconsciousness ways. According to scripture, while on the cross, Jesus says, “God forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34) In the ethos of the moment, we hear the testimony to the lack of awareness or blindness that we as people can have, resulting in us carrying out violent, destructive acts of injustice. I am also touched at Jesus’ ability, according to the narrative, to acknowledge and hold a position of deep insight, compassion and forgiveness toward those from whom he suffered. Saint Paul comments, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” (Romans 7:15) Paul is referring to this lack of understanding or awareness of self. Both Jesus and Paul acknowledge that we are a confluence of knowing and not knowing, of being aware and unaware, conscious and unconscious, light and shadow. Ignorance and lack of awareness are not blessings, but a human blight that can lead to hurt, pain and injustices. Often, sins of omission and commission do not grow out of conscious disobedience, but unconscious blindness. We can and are challenged to grow in self-awareness and consciousness. In the words of the theologian, Nicholas of Cusa, “A theology of unknowing is necessary for a theology of knowing.”

Is it possible for any of us individually or as a congregation to know ourselves fully? In my opinion, to know ourselves or for a community to know itself fully is too simplistic for the wonderful, complex, mystery that we are. I have discovered that the inner journey is not
as much about knowing oneself as it is about becoming a deeper person, thoughtful and intentional about ordinary life and our relationship to self, God and one another. Picking up on our complex natures, Elizabeth O’Connor authored a book entitled Our Many Selves. Her title was conceptualizing that we are one, we are many--a parliament of personhood. In contrast, the Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber contends that it is the space between us that holds everything. This ever-changing space between is the ground of relationship. Buber claims that there can be no I-Thou relationship, no true exchange between self and other, until there is a self to relate to. Whether we are one, many or both, I believe we can know ourselves better, but not fully. The minute we know self, it disappears; the self we knew is gone. We do not reside in a body, a mind, in a community or a world where it is achievable. Part of what lies in our hearts and minds is potentiality and lurks in the shadows. It resides in mystery, the unknown, the unspoken and unarticulated and has not yet come into being.

Human beings and congregations are frontiers between what is known about self, other(s) and God, what is not known, what is and what is becoming. The act of turning any part of the unknown into the known is simply an invitation for an equal measure of the unknown to flow back in and re-establish that frontier so as to reassert the far horizons of individual or community life, to make us what we are.

We are a moving edge between what we know or imagine about ourselves, our communities and those outside it, and what we do not know about each. Our moving edge also includes what we are becoming and what excites and frightens us in that becoming. William Shakespeare’s Ophelia states, “We know what we are, but know not what we may be.”

Self-knowledge entails understanding self as a confluence, a flowering meeting of elements unique to a given context, including all the other innumerable selves in that context and world. I believe that each of us has a particular abiding character, but we show radically different aspects of our self in accordance to the territory or landscape through which we travel in a given time or epoch, our given context. It is about what we are all going through and what is going through us. In a poem, the poet Seamus Heaney has the line, “You are neither here nor there/A hurry through which strange and known things pass.”

Self-knowledge or self-awareness is not clarity, transparency or knowing how everything works. It is not seeing our inner selves and our congregation’s inner lives (the collective community’s soul) as a set of commodities to be unearthed, fixed and knocked into shape. Self-knowledge for individuals and congregations is a fiercely attentive form of humility and thankfulness, a sense of the privilege of a particular form of participation; it is coming to know the way we hold the conversation of life, and perhaps, above all, the miracle that there is a particular something rather than an abstract nothing and that we are a very, very particular part of that particular something.

What do we recognize and applaud as self-knowledge, self-awareness and becoming more conscious of self in an individual and congregation?
It is the humble demeanor of the apprentice, someone paying extreme attention to themselves, to others, to life, to God and to the next step, which they may survive or they may not. People and communities who are self-aware and conscious don’t seem to have all the answers but are attempting to learn what they can about themselves and those with whom they share the journey. They are people like everyone else, wondering what they and their community are about to turn into or become. They are appreciators of the horizon, of possibilities, even when they do not reach them.

We are neither purely individuals nor fully creatures of our communities, but an act of becoming that can never be held in place by a false form of nomenclature. No matter our need to find a place to stand as individuals or as faith communities amidst the onward flow of the world, the real foundation of the deepest, self is in the self-forgetful remembering of the meeting itself.

The Columbian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez said of his wife that he knew her so well that she was completely and utterly unknown to him. Those same words describe our encounters with congregations, these living organisms, these unpredictable communities with wonderful and frightening lives of their own, as can be said for us as individuals. The more I know a congregation or myself, the more they are completely and utterly unknown to me.

What a beautiful challenge and journey of mystery, wonder and delight!

_Agree or disagree, you are invited into the conversation!_

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_To be fully human, fully myself,
To accept all that I am, all that you envision,
This is my prayer.
Walk with me out to the rim of life,
Beyond security.
Take me to the exquisite edge of courage
And release me to become._
~~Sue Monk Kidd

_In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned._
~~Annie Dillard
When everything seems to be set
to show me off as a man (person) of intelligence,
the fool I keep concealed on my person
takes over my talk and occupies my mouth."
~~Pablo Neruda

~~Prayer by John Winn~~

Do I dare to look into a mirror, O God, and see myself as I really am? Even though I am aware that I stand with the hearers of a word they cannot unhear, I am also aware that I stand among those who have not been doers of that word. I am one of them. Deep within, I yearn to be more of a trustworthy steward of that word of love, that gift of love: hearing and doing. Ultimately, I know, dear God, that you are the only judge who really matters as to how good a steward I have been of the mysteries of faith and action, but I do have to live in the Now, with what I know about myself. Help me with that. Amen.

SELECTIONS: A Journey Toward Spiritual Formation, John Winn, p. 58,
This book is available through Barnes and Nobles and Amazon. We recommend it!

There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.
~~Howard Thurman

Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.
~~Walt Whitman

The True Self is not our creation, but God’s. It is the self we are in our depths.
It is our capacity for divinity and transcendence.
~~Sue Monk Kidd
Reflective Questions for Difficult Situations

(These questions come from a business book, and I think they pose some good reflective questions to consider as one thinks through difficult situations. While not complete, they offer some insight. I hope you find them helpful.)

**What results do I want to create?**
(When people answer this question honestly, it helps us to become less comfort-centered and more purpose-centered.)

**What would my story be if I were living the values I expect of others?**
(When people answer this question, it helps us to become less externally directed and more internally directed.)

**How do others feel about this situation?**
(When people answer this question, it helps us become less me-focused and more other-focused. It helps create an attitude and way of compassion and empathy.)

**What are two or three (or four or five) strategies I/we could use to accomplish my/our/the community’s purpose/intention for this situation?**
(When people answer this question, it helps us become less internally closed and more externally open.)

(From *Lift* by Ryan W. Quinn and Robert E. Quinn, p. 18. with some adaptations from Craig Gilliam)
... to be human
is to become visible
while carrying
what is hidden
as a gift to others...
~~ David Whyte

When compassion wakes up in us, we find ourselves more willing to become vulnerable,
to take the risk of entering the pain of others.
~~Sue Monk Kidd

I have learned not to worry about love;
but to honor its coming with all my heart.
~~Alice Walker

Upcoming Opportunities through
The Center for Pastoral Excellence

WEBINAR – 2014 hosted by JustPeace– 1st series

February 19th (Wednesday) – “Homiletical Hot Potatoes:
Preaching on Difficult Topics” with Dr. Alyce McKenzie.

March 20th (Thursday) –“Trauma Transformation and Narrative”
with David Anderson Hooker.

April 23rd (Wednesday) – “Appreciative Inquiry and Faith Communities” with Joy Samuels.

May 21st (Wednesday) – “Emotional Systems, Conflict Transformation and Faith Communities” with Dr. W. Craig Gilliam.

Please save these dates! This series of webinars is designed to strengthen principles
and skills in faith-based conflict transformation.

Go to https://sites.google.com/a/justpeaceumc.org/webinars/
for more information and to register.

The webinars will cost $25 per webinar.
They will begin at 10AM ET (9AM CT, 8AM MT, 7AM PT)
and last approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes.
CEU’s are available if participant registers for all five sessions.
RIM Gatherings

Abbey Retreat, St. Joseph Abbey, Covington, LA, May 12 – 14.
For RIM One, Two and Three and other ministers who want to be part of these experiences—

Mark your calendars and contact Craig Gilliam or Linda Gregg for more information.

Transition Seminar: Manna for the Journey,
May 3, 2014, The Wesley Center
9:00 – 3:30             $45 per family

Poetic Meditation

Love After Love
Derek Walcott

The time will come
When with elation,
You will greet yourself arriving
At your own door, in your own mirror,
And each will smile at the other's welcome,

And say, sit here, Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
To itself, to the stranger who has loved you

All your life, whom you ignored
For another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

The photographs, the desperate notes,
Peel your image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

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I wish I knew the beauty
Of leaves falling
To whom are we beautiful
As we go?
~~David Ignatou

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.
~~Rumi

But for us the road unfurls itself, we count the words in our pockets, we wonder how it will be without them, we don’t stop walking, we know there is far to go....’
~~Denise Levertov

We will not perish for a lack of information; but only for want of appreciation. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. . . .Reverence is one of our answers to the presence of mystery.
~~Abraham Herschel

Do no harm.
Do good.
Stay in Love with God.
~~Ruben Job

Thanks for your ministry!
If we can be of assistance in any way, please let us know.

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