

Unknowability

Please note: I place this document under “Reflections” simply because that category is a bit empty compared with the others. Actually, the categories Essays, Miscellaneous and Reflections are more or less arbitrary, at least for now. Some reorganization is in order.

All material on this home page, whether dealing with biblical or other ancient texts, is dedicated to *lectio divina* as it centers around Christian spirituality. A more recent document concerns notations on Gregory of Nyssa’s **On Virginit**y, a task which turned out to be more formidable than expected. Because **Virginit**y was an early work by Gregory, I figure it would be easier to grasp but quickly discovered quite the opposite. Despite this, the effort was rewarding. The unanticipated delay with making notations on the text gave time to pause and reflect upon all the essays and documents on the Lectio Page to see if I could discern an overall theme or if not, pick out one or two trends that were emerging and worth further examination. Hence, I am grateful for the opportunity which provided the impetus to write the current article which arose rather unexpectedly. The most important documents on the Lectio Page fall under the category of “primary sources” and are enhanced by notations. Some are more prolific whereas others consist either of transliterated Greek or Hebrew words followed by their translations and comments. I consider a number of texts as partial and therefore awaiting further development. “Notations on Plato’s Republic” is one example that comes to mind.

The object of *lectio divina* is, of course, God himself. That’s why importance is placed upon biblical, patristic material. As noted elsewhere, tradition uses the adjective *divina* (feminine) instead of the expected *sacra*. The latter pertains to sacred objects such as instruments for the Mass whereas the former refers directly to God himself. Thus we have a reading or *lectio* which is *divina* or divine...God-like, if you will. As for pre-Christian writings of Greece and Rome, right from the beginning Christians considered them vital insofar as they provided structure for an interpretation of their sacred texts. Even more important, Hellenic philosophy gave substance to Christian theology once it broke out into the wider Mediterranean world. Without that support, Christianity could have remained just another localized Middle Eastern sect. As for the non-Christian documents in mind, all have an innate authority which any serious reader can recognize intuitively as holding a special status. One Christian author who recognized this clearly and is singled out for attention on the Lectio Home Page is Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century) partly because he adapted Plato’s thought to an exceptional degree. In fact, this site is linked to one dedicated exclusively to Gregory. A second general class of texts on the Lectio Page falls under the loose category of essays which explore not just *lectio divina* proper but select issues which might be described as bordering upon it. They are more personal in nature but have bearing upon virtually all the primary sources just mentioned.

Now let’s get to the subject of the essay at hand, unknowability, a term which may strike some people as unfamiliar, abstract or not tied into to the theme of *lectio divina*. Actually, unknowability is scattered throughout many documents in the Lectio Page which center around both the scriptural and patristic heritage. Christian tradition speaks a lot about Jesus Christ and God yet at the same time recognizes that never can we know God adequately. And so that observation mentioned in the first paragraph about a key theme is readily evident and worth examining in its own right. But before proceeding further, let’s start with a concrete example since the term

“unknowability” has an abstract ring about it. Fortunately I have a number of friends who are serious about practicing the Christian way of life. They span the gamut from being engaged in social justice to a fairly strict form of solitary existence. What makes them all stand out is that they are under the guidance of a spiritual director. This subjection of one’s own will to the direction of another person is rare nowadays and reveals a personal commitment which is a constant source of inspiration and a sign of genuineness. At the center of all these men and women (many belong to the tradition of the Catholic Church) is the person of Jesus Christ. Another important group of friends belongs to the Lutheran Church in Iceland, very committed to living out the Gospel. I might add that in more recent years these Icelanders have adopted more traditional forms of contemplative prayer coupled with the practice of *lectio divina*. Currently two major groups exist and are flourishing, and a few are considering a quasi-hermetical life style.

As for the Catholic Church, just the mention of it as an institution evokes gut-level feelings due to recent tragedies of sexual abuse by priests which are familiar to everyone. But as one social activist said recently, compared with most organizations, the Church is the largest sandbox of them all, a place broad enough in which to play where everyone can find a corner as well as to share in the playing. The hierarchy’s function is to give a concrete space and structure without which it would not exist. It even throws in an added bonus, sacred time as found in the liturgical calendar, different from yet parallel to the secular one. So when you step into a church you step into both a particular place and a particular time. The image of the Church as a large sandbox falls in line with the traditional one of it being a ship or more exactly, an ark. An important part of keeping this ark afloat is not so much maintaining a hierarchy, keeping physical buildings going or fretting about current issues, important as they are, but of exploring the incredibly vast tradition accumulated over the past two thousand years. Surely it contains enough resources to keep one person busy for a lifetime...and then some.

Two friends, a man and a woman now up there in years, are quite renowned for their spiritual insight and stand out because they represent a life style that is gaining in popularity, namely, hermetical existence, whether it’s practiced in the wilderness or in the heart of a metropolis. Both are persons you wouldn’t recognize if you ran into them, preferring to remain in the background and devoted to the practice of Christian meditation (call it contemplation if you will). Also both do not engage in apostolic work nor ever had an attraction for it. In fact, they would be considered unfit for such ministry. For some, that makes their lives a bit suspicious. Friends would call them hermits; true to some extent, but the two reside in urban settings and are very gregarious which wouldn’t give the impression that they follow such a life style. As noted above, they live under the direction of a priest which each claim is absolutely essential. First let’s talk about the man who resides in a large East Coast city and as he claims, being lost in that environment offers more opportunities than the wilderness. An urban hermit can simply walk out his apartment to the store, move about anonymously with no one to pester him and then return home. Yet there’s something magnetic about people like this. You can ferret them out even though lost in the city crowd. Looking for such a person has nothing to do with searching him out in the conventional manner. By no means is this urban hermit squirreled away in an abandoned subway or tenement building but lives an outwardly normal life like everyone else. It’s the classic example of hiding in the open. Throughout most of his life always he has had minor jobs here and there without seeking advancement. When asked to take on greater responsibility, promptly he would quite and move on. Now that he has retired, he devotes himself more to what seems like useless activity...or no activity at all. In other words, this man enjoys sitting (that’s what he calls it), plain and simple,

which he does either in his apartment, in church or in a nearby park. Nothing more, a waste of time to any passer-by.

So what did I find striking about this man, a mere drop in a city of millions of people? Obviously it had to do with his spirit which is hidden under a shabby exterior of second-hand clothes. Although I hadn't traveled to the city where he lives, a friend whom I meet several times a year lives fairly close by and was touched by him profoundly. Speaking with this friend is just like speaking with the man himself. His needs always have been small (he lived in part off alms), had plenty of time on his hands and spends much of it either in church or in the city's public library. Most of this was a solitary venture amid crowded streets, subways and buildings which he claimed was ideal for practicing the presence of God.

The second person worth speaking about is less than a hermit or better, our conventional ideas of what a hermit should be, urban, religious or in the wilderness. For most of her life she has suffered from agoraphobia and continues to do so. Hard to believe, but this person has not left her house and property of six acres for thirty-five years...not once. When she contracted (for less than a better term) agoraphobia she didn't know how to handle it, having been a teacher in an ivy league college. For about eight years she descended into a terrible depression partly because agoraphobia was less understood then. One day she got tired of being depressed...I like the way she phrased it...and decided she wanted to use it to help people. The only problem was that being confined to her home didn't put her in touch with the greater world, a fact that increased her depression. Then she figured she had nothing else to do but hang around and pray, asking God not so much to cure her but to be of some type of service. Within a few short weeks people pretty much showed upon at her door asking for advice. To this day my friend hasn't a clue as to how this started, but that's okay. This increased as time went by until her reputation spread as a renowned spiritual director. The common denominator of all visitors, she claimed, was that they knew she was always on her property or in her room while they were God-only-knows-where. By way of note, in more recent years she is confined to her second storey room, quite small by any standard. And so we have this woman, completely useless, hanging around doing basically nothing for thirty-five years. To think that she hadn't exited the end of her driveway for that long is astounding, especially when you come into actual contact with her.

Permit me to add a third friend who wouldn't qualify as a hermit but in fact lives as one. He's in his mid sixties, divorced twice, and lives alone while being quite comfortable with it. He doesn't follow any religious practices though goes to church on Sunday and is admired by friends as a naturally upright person. Not long ago he told me that the local down-and-out people gravitate toward him, and was puzzled why. Then he asked kind of rhetorically, "Am I the same as they?" I would reply in the affirmative but with the difference that he knows is...has been humbled by two divorces...and has come to terms with his limitations. Those who gravitate toward him are in the same situation as basically having nothing to do but hang around. While this fellow is more conventional compared with the other two friends, he has an innate spirituality without realizing it.

The reason I bring up these three people is to provide a lead into the subject of unknowability and for answering a fundamental question about life. We all have it, and more people out there than you think are of the same mind. What holds them back is that they fail to face head-on the all important question: what do you do with yourself once your basic needs have been taken care of? If you're a religious person, this includes what you do after all the

hours you had put into ministry, study, reading and even prayer. It has to come to an end somewhere, sometime. On a daily basis the common response is “Time to go to bed,” but that’s not good enough. The “time” in mind here –and it doesn’t have to be at the end of the day but anytime–is one we dread and fiddle around with in order to delay. Even people who’ve been at the spiritual life for many years are plagued by it. The easiest way of handling this problem is to ignore it, but that doesn’t resolve much in the long run. We can do a pretty good job at keeping this apparent emptiness away, especially with modern gadgets. Another way to handle this unwelcome time is by thinking of something else. If it’s evening (often the case when such inexplicable moods arise), we plan for the morrow. In other words, anything stationary is anathema which is why the onset of late afternoon and early even hours can be trying without our comprehending why. The Church had a great idea to handle this time by celebrating Jesus’ death on the cross around 3pm. On a more secular note, the English have devised Tea Time late afternoon when the weight of time has been pressing in upon us for some hours. They have chosen to celebrate this situation rather than fret away or continue with their work.

The first impression of these three extraordinary people is their ordinary demeanor designed (I could almost say ‘tailored’) to conceal their spiritual intensity. What’s a real scream is that the lady tends to wear somewhat flashy, even outrageous blouses or T-shirts compared with the ultra-drab clothing of my urban hermit friend. Obviously both have Jesus Christ as the center of spirituality and don’t seem bothered much by anything else. In the course of our lengthy conversations which always start off casually but get more intense as time passes on, we discuss in considerable detail their spiritual relationships which proved revealing. As I had intimated dimly, the issue at hand end up talking how we handle time once all the basics have been covered. Despite the distance between both and complete ignorance of each other, they were in remarkable agreement about the basics. The fellow living in a metropolis admitted not to be perfect at it—I was relieved to hear him acknowledge it was a daily struggle—but practice does make perfect or better, it familiarizes you with the territory so you can comport yourself better the next day. The next day will turn out to be the same and the one after that and so forth, a bleak prospect if you don’t come to grips with it. I was able to verify through our conversations and later correspondence (he’s not into email, thank God) that while the struggle never goes away, with age it tends to decrease, and that is a welcome gift. Then a few weeks later I bounced a summary of this conversation off my agoraphobic friend who casually said “of course!” That’s how much in agreement these two stranger-friends were.

So working from the principle that one person is a microcosm of us all, I was curious if insights into the spiritual life as witnessed by this woman and two men, so worthy of imitation but beyond our actual reach, could be brought to light more clearly. Not that we should imitate them literally but set before us their examples as representative of a larger reality. As I probed deeper and got to know what made them tick, quickly I intuited that more like them must exist. I had no proof but instinctively knew such persons are more numerous than we think. The problem is that they hiding out there right beneath our noses. Once you track them down—and they have an uncanny ability to know that you had discovered them or somehow had smelled them out—they open up and allow glimpses into how they comport themselves. You could say it’s a question of like attracting like. This information isn’t garnered so much from observation or even by what they communicate to us. Instead, it comes from attuning ourselves to the same divine source they’re tuned into when we’re in their presence or not. Since this source is independent of us as well as them, it’s easy to verify that the connection is real. This ability to look without looking sounds exotic, kind of Zen-like, but is not that mysterious. It’s simply a matter of recognizing yourself as

sharing the same divine image and of becoming more like it.

One problem—and I use this word somewhat loosely yet in a deliberate fashion—we encounter with such folks is that faith plays a central role in their lives. Bringing up the word “faith” is uncomfortable because that word can be a blanket description which doesn’t invite further inquiry. Also it can smack of religious piety, a turn-off for some people. You either “believe” or you don’t and if you do, you express it in religious terms which is what you’d expect. One such definition of faith as from a popular, contemporary book runs as “We are only aware of God dwelling in our soul by faith; and so by acts of faith we must proceed.” Thus faith is presented as an effort to leap up against our natural inclination which belongs on the earth, not an uncommon perception. Also, if you don’t believe, essentially you’re not one of us. Lurking in the background is that intelligent inquiry is to be squashed or looked down upon. Besides, faith has a kind of willful ring to it, that we grit out teeth, as we have faith in the face of what life throw at us. It is Stoic in the popular sense of the term without doing justice to that philosophy. Regardless of your take on the term “faith” as an act of the will against all odds or as something more comfy, eventually you come to a Great Wall of Silence before which you cannot go further. Hence, silence = faith. So what we’re inquiring about here is a search for how to comport ourselves correctly in this circumstance. That is akin to how we behave when we come home, shut the door and find out there’s nothing else to do because everything has been done. Going to sleep isn’t the answer. It just delays our response for tomorrow and the next evening...

Our experience at not knowing how to comport ourselves once everything that requires taking care of has been taken care of is the essence of boredom. However, that’s not quite accurate; better to say we have an anticipation of boredom, of not knowing what to do before we get there, and that’s a projection into the future of our present anxiety. This may be fine for several days or a bit longer, but should we allow it to continue unchecked, we have reason to start getting anxious. So often we’ve heard people speak of destitute folks, wheelchair-bound seniors or even worse, wheelchair-bound young people. It isn’t their handicaps that move us but their stationary existence which sticks in our memories. I’m tempted to include prisoners, but for the most part their lives are under constant physical threat. You need some basic security to begin with. Despite the stationary lives of such people, we are fascinated with them for one reason or another. Each day they remain stationary while we’re out and about. While we’re engaged in “important” matters, the contrast between us and them couldn’t be stronger. And yet we know that we will be like these folks when we return home: if not physically then mentally. While we were active during the day, they had carried out their duty as guards keeping watch on the walls of a city. When we query them at some length to see what makes them tick, of how they comported themselves while we were busy as bees, often they bring up that awkward word “faith.” It’s awkward in that while we were out saving the world, we didn’t have to “believe in” anything special because our natural (more on how this adjective is used later) movement was pretty much self-perpetuating. Because our stationary friends weren’t moving about, they had to deal all the time what we run into only once the day is done, the threat of boredom which hovers at the threshold of death. Yet as we drift off to sleep, we can’t help but think that these people are unique witnesses...almost martyrs in the modern sense as witnesses to a mystery too deep for words.

Close observation of people “who don’t move” indicates that being stationary and having faith are closely related, and that enables us to see in the concrete what is meant by faith; while not detracting from the value of faith

traditionally held as a theological virtue, other less freighted terms can be used to describe the condition of immovability we're discussing. Perhaps the best correlation to the term "faith" is the biblical Hebrew word *'emunah* which derives from the verbal root—verbal roots are very important in Hebrew—*'aman* (to believe), from which we obtain "amen." Both terms are more far-reaching than our English usage. The root *'aman* suggests to prop, to sustain, and this means doing it over an extended period of time, not just here and there. So when you have *'emunah*, you become stable or fixed in the object (of faith) which is more to the point than typical notions about believing in God as a blind and willful gesture which flies in the face of external circumstances. A particularly charming offshoot of the Hebrew verbal root is the noun *'amon* or "little child" as in Prov 8.30: "I was beside him like a master workman, and I was daily his delight rejoicing before him always." While the **Revised Standard Version** translates *'amon* as "workman," literally it means "little child" or closer to the verbal root, "as one brought up with him." This child-like activity associated with God's creative work amplifies the verbal root of faith, *'aman*, and suggests dynamism which otherwise would go unperceived.

Most people "who have faith" or "who are faithful" are active and practice their reliance upon God in vital ways, day after day. That's one overarching category, if you will, but there's another one comprised of people who are not active for reasons other than the ones already mentioned. More often than not, they have decided to withdraw from society for religious reasons. Actually the second category is larger than we think since it embraces people not necessarily found in religious orders. Without exception those who are "active" in their faith eventually end up in the second category unless they die early or suddenly. Category #2 is a catch-all and therefore is the one worthy of closer examination. The reason? Those who find themselves confined for one reason or another are "full of faith" because they have nothing else to do. A number of such persons have admitted this freely; in addition to having no place to go, they have nothing to hide. A special distinguishing mark is their sense of humor. It comes from a self-knowledge as full as anyone could experience and from living under its shadow with a relentlessness that would make most of us tremble. They catch glimpses of this several times during the day by standing back and looking at themselves with the result that automatically they laugh partly because the situation is funny but more, because there's nothing else to do. They know they won't get punished for it and so just sit where they've been all the while. In other words, they've passed beyond guilt and its consequences. Yet unknown to us, they have moved ahead, actually very far ahead. And so they have plenty of time on their hands to be more creative about life than active folks. Perhaps that's why they are sought out for consultation. They don't advertise at all preferring to shun publicity. Nevertheless, somehow they materialize out of thin air which is testimony that their lives are fuller than most of us.

In this second category either all things are provided for or else they are not, excluding exceptional circumstances as dire poverty or the results of war. The major problem is that people who haven't fallen into this category are precluded by circumstances to sit still long enough to develop the faith of those who are confined willfully. It's a situation when the human spirit is tempted to rebel and rebel with all its force. So to recap, the type of faith at issue boils down to what do you do when everything that needed to be done has been done? Where do you go from there? The most immediate problem is that you don't go anywhere, period, which is scary. Earlier in human history this wasn't a problem, given the perilous circumstances of most peoples' lives, but that has changed during the past century. Furthermore, people are living longer and have to contend with how to comport themselves constructively during prolonged illness or after retirement when they're more or less shelved.

Any talk about what to do once things have been done intimates a distinction between an “I” which is persistent in hanging around and all other people and objects under its regard. And so the “I” may be likened to a soul or essence, and essence here means something that’s inescapable. Prior to modern conveniences as intimated in the last paragraph people were too caught up to make this distinction; their noses were too close to the grindstone struggling to survive. Only a tiny privileged class had the opportunity to indulge in such musings and even they were disinclined to it. Their leisure, as it is today but on a far larger scale, was devoid of that ancient leisure termed *otium*, and *otum* meant freedom from servile work to pursue things of the mind and of the spirit. This distinction between an “I” and everything under its gaze might sound fanciful, but it has validity because the distinction is ready for the proof once we’re by ourselves and once everything that needs to be done has been done. Actually it’s so common to our experience that rarely we reflect upon it. The “I” which is engaged in figuring things out and trying to arrange them is where we reside most of the time, yet an intimation persists that it’s a shadow or half-self. We have a creepy feeling it is a less-than-real existence even though we function there 99% of the time. As for the other 1% , we feel it when alone, but this being-alone doesn’t last long enough for us to get desperate and formulate an escape. Despite being 1% of ourselves, its influence is enough to make the other 99% feel insecure. And so during the course of the day we recall those people who from one reason or another have as their life work hanging around doing nothing as they keep watch on the city walls.

Thus far we put the “I” in terms of being occupied doing stuff, true enough, because of its insatiable desire for activity. Whether we like it or not, we get an up-close and personal look at it during the night when the mind is free to shift into high gear cranking out endless thoughts and emotions, many of which defy description. When dawn comes we look back and wonder if we were ever capable of producing such...well...garbage. This happens night after night and is beyond our control or so it appears unless we decide to confront the situation. Nighttime might not be the best opportunity, but the possibility of examining this “I” during the day exists when it presses less forcibly upon us. Thus when it happens again (that very night) we’ll be prepared better. This struggle which disrupts our nights begs that we comes to grips with it. We’re physically inactive which sets the stage for being invaded by unwanted thoughts against which we have little control. If we get up and did something (often is the case, even reading) to interrupt the assaults, the demons usually quiet down allowing us to return to sleep. Indeed, the word “demon” is an ideal word for this relentless assault though not taken in the supernatural sense which is fairly rare.

Now take that state of affairs and replicate it during the day. It’s not possible, of course, to recreate the special nighttime silence which plays a role in evoking the onslaught of uncontrollable thoughts and images, but we can approximate the experience. The silence in and by itself is not the issue; rather, it serves as an open invitation for all sorts of stuff to fill our heads and keep us awake, mockingly so. That doesn’t mean we should sleep during the day—far from it—rather, we our goal is to examine in greater detail that “I” whose appetite for activity cannot be quenched. Even the fact that we do this during the day as opposed to the night psychologically helps us to unearth the unending swarm of nightly visions. Besides, the daylight makes us less passive to our thoughts and more attentive to their ebb and flow. What can be learned here can be applied later at night.

This distinction between an “I” and everything else obviously is artificial and is offered as a lead-in to the subject of

this essay, unknowability, which requires some circling of the subject in order to grasp it better. Observations about this “I” are intended to show how burdensome it is most of the time even though most of our knowledge derives from its activity. When we’re happy the “I” remains present but not given as much attention, but that is passing since we live most of the time in a kind of neutral zone, neither happy nor unhappy. This neutrality of the “I” plus our disregard for it when we’re happy makes it difficult for most of us to examine its nature. Only when we’re afflicted does it come to our attention, painfully so. More common than pain, however, are those occasions when we’re bored or have nothing to do...because, as noted above, everything that needed doing has been taken care of. After that we’re left hanging around with time on our hands, just waiting.

Always we are caught in between this unceasing alteration between “I” and the stuff under its purview while at the same time we intuit that some other “place” exists not subject to its tedious existence. This “place” seems to be just outside our view, and despite denials of its existence, it persists in our memory. It’s almost as though we had come from there and lost our way back to this homeland. There comes to mind the Book of Ecclesiastes with its famous cry: “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the preacher, ‘vanity of vanities! All is vanity.’” It’s interesting that the preacher focuses upon forms of movement in nature and human affairs (both which mirror each other in their endless repetitive cycles) which never bring satisfaction. So the crucial question is, can you put a stop to this movement (‘round and round goes the wind,’ 1.6)? A look at our experience which comprises an uncontrollable flow of thoughts and images at night loudly proclaims the task is impossible. Such is the grim outlook, à la Ecclesiastes, once we’ve assessed the situation. If that seems dismal, it become worse once we engage in the task of examining the relation between “I” and all that under its sway...so much that we find ourselves having stumbled a veritable hornet’s nest. It makes any perseverance a mockery due to the fierce resistance we encounter. Yet if we don’t persevere, our dissatisfaction not only remains but increases. And so we’re caught in an in-between land.

So the question at hand is how do we handle knowledge generated by the interaction between this “I” and what lays under its sway? The stuff involved consists in every type of knowledge conceivable...no exceptions...for ultimately it all boils down to the common denominator of movement as Ecclesiastes has pointed out so well. There has to be a point, then, where intellectual acknowledgment of this movement gives way to a decision to take action differently from the one we’re accustomed to, and that entails engaging in an activity not yet familiar to us. That’s why the task is difficult to undertake. Cyclic, repetitive movement is difficult to counter because we’re so habituated to it; hence we have to adopt a movement unfamiliar to our habits in order to step outside its influence. Actually, “movement” is inaccurate since it implies raising familiar place-to-place direction to another one which essentially is the same. And the direction, if you will, of concern here doesn’t fall into that category. Ecclesiastes’ task is precisely to state the situation, nothing more, and he gives no clues as how we are to break loose from “vanity” conceived in terms of movement. Maybe he wants us to come up with the solution instead. At the same time we intuit that we we’re born with the ability to follow through on our intuition that an alternative does exist and undertake the task instead of re-formulating that which is familiar to describe what lies beyond our ken.

So let’s say that the “I” and its knowledge consist of movement, fair and obvious enough. Once we make the acknowledgment, the question arises, does an alternative exist, and what would this alternative look like? Would it partake of movement or knowledge as implied in the last paragraph? After all, movement and knowledge are part and parcel of our constitution; we’d be inclined to make any projection into the unknown in accord with them.

Let's make a statement of the most obvious kind: knowledge applies to what we know and movement applies to that which moves. Therein consists our world. Now by way of experiment let's assume there is no-knowledge and no-movement, and that doesn't mean ignorance nor a form of mental paralysis. There's nothing "mystical" at all about these words. Note that we come to this point mostly out of desperation with our current situation. We've come to the end our resources at how to deal with the so-called "I" and everything that falls under its gaze, for both fail to satisfy. We've had hints of it all along, but now our desperation has become so acute that we have to talk as basically as possible. We know, too, that shifting from knowledge to a state of unknowability (as the essay's title has it; we'll stick with the term to contrast it with knowledge) and from movement to a lack of movement is as far in the other direction as we can get from conventional experience. One wonders if Ecclesiastes himself may have entertained this thought after his musings on vanity-as-movement. Again, only desperation and a freedom born of no other choices lay at the heart of this option. It might be added, too, that personal humiliations are ideal at bringing us to this point; they don't have to be manifest necessarily to everyone but acknowledged as part of the package.

Whether we like it or not, the first thought (knowledge!) springing from this option is that deliberately we're putting ourselves in a state of mental and spiritual blankness, a fate worse than death, for at least death has a finality about it where we don't have anything more to worry about. That blankness assumes images of folks on the street, those sequestered in nursing homes or persons in some type of forced isolation which restricts their acquisition of knowledge and their freedom of movement. Perhaps Jesus had in mind these people—they're abundant throughout all times and all cultures—when he said that the poor you'll always have with you. In other words, the poor includes people who for one reason or another aren't doing anything. In short, these people are dead while alive, the living dead, as the expression has it. Still, our inquiring spirits persevere for reasons which we're unable to fathom. We realize that we've come up against the Final Frontier of human existence beyond which there's no place to go. Actually, there's nothing "final" about this "frontier." It's the starting point for something brand new, wholly other from our experience gained from knowledge and from movement. At this juncture we may describe the shift from one where we had placed reliance upon form to one without form. It's tempting to label the result of this shift as "energy," but that sounds gnostic or New Age, so better to avoid it.

Allow for some brief remarks about the notion of form since it's part n' parcel of thoughts. Like movement and knowledge, it's so pervasive to our experience that barely we reflect upon it...that all things have some type of form or *morphe*, a kind of unconscious insight we apply to non-material things such as emotions, ideas and the like. Upon reaching that outer limit of perceiving movement as "vanity" à la Ecclesiastes, concomitant with our realization is that all forms are "vain" or transitory. Part of the difficulty of perceiving a difference between the natural plane of movement and the one we'll discuss shortly dubbed as "normal" comes through our inordinate attachment to form which, if left to run riot, can reach the point of idolization. That's a familiar concept to persons familiar with theology; for now, suffice it to leave it for that.

So the only thing left after we've reached the limits of the "I" and the knowledge associated with it is the realm we designate as unknowability. This sounds absurd but really is true from experience. Although throughout life we intuit some type of reality just beyond our grasp which is not perceived easily, it isn't less real. Actually it is vastly larger than anything we could entertain. So let's designate that realm as normal compared with the one to which

we're habituated as belonging to the natural. By normal is meant that which sets the standard for behavior, in other words, that which is normative, pretty much how it's taken in this essay. And this normal is a new way of being in the world. So why do we designate it such? It boils down to the feeling that we are in the presence of something that governs all else, including ourselves. The Greek term for this is quite good, *nomos*, which also applies to the pasturing of animals. A sure-fire proof of this presence is the profound peace we feel at this moment, deeper than anything experienced previously in our lives. What could be a better norm than this? And who would not want peace nor be unable to detect its reality even if we don't have it? From this vantage point we can grasp better everything which had been governing our lives from birth, if you will, not unlike the person who had emerged from Plato's cave into the sunlight. This image seems to be a universal experience, give or take relatively minor shifts in details. That which had been natural so long turns out to be alien to the new order we've uncovered. It's hard, really, to see how our innate familiarity with the natural state of affairs can be inferior to anything because since if you look around, no one seems to have come up with an alternative to compare it with. One popular example that comes to mind is that fish can't comprehend a non-watery environment. However, even though such a reality might be proposed and even intuited as genuine, we remain with little or no proof except that peace which is lacking in the natural order of things.

So the task at hand is to explore in greater detail whether what is unknowable is better than what we know. Even though we have come to the threshold of a peace hitherto un-experienced, where does that lead, if anywhere? Do we just sit around all day being peaceful, and that's it? That's the Big Question. It points to a greater issue, whether something natural is superior to something that is normal with the latter setting the norm for behavior. Or we could put it another way, whether something natural bestows peace just as fine as that which is normal. Actually acquainting ourselves with the unknowable is directly attainable by a simple practice. We can get there by pretending to be dead (some forms of traditional meditation are involved here) and see what happens. Yet we have a twofold problem: first convincing ourselves of its value and second (more importantly) sustaining interest in this practice despite a first flush of excitement. Our first contact with the unknowable brings relief at being freed up to enjoy an existence we hadn't realized before, of being dead to all that once had preoccupied us. Then with the passage of time we realize the difficulty of sustaining this attention which keeps falling back to the familiar realm where "I" and knowledge function...in short, falling back to the natural realm. The realm of unknowability is normal in that we feel at home in a way that can't be described as exactly natural or in accord with nature, for we're in a realm "above" or "beyond" nature. Both terms are inadequate, of course, but are offered with this limitation in mind.

We can say that the normal mode enjoys metaphysical superiority. Here the term "metaphysical" is taken literally as after-the-physical but after insofar as our access to it whereas in reality this realm exists before hand. Once ensconced in the normal realm, we have a new-found ability to look back upon the natural one which always comes first. This insight happens suddenly without our asking and turns out to be a discovery too good to be true. We have to pinch ourselves to believe it even if it flies in the face of all the evidence from the natural world, and that's a considerable amount of stuff piled against us. Note the words "a lot" which means quantity, not quality, a big difference. Here the words of St. Paul ring true: "But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical and then the spiritual" [1Cor 15.46]. For "spiritual" we could substitute "normal" and for "physical" that which is "natural." Now the "first" of which Paul speaks is one of acquaintance, not necessarily one proper to the normal

realm. In actuality, the situation is reverse and goes against our intuition: first comes the spiritual/normal followed by the physical/natural. Acquaintance from birth with the latter gives every reason to deny the former. That's part of why the word "unknowable" is used here; unknowable in the sense of not-being-acquainted-with.

A note of caution. When we first hit upon this distinction between natural and normal, knowledge and unknowability, we're tempted to fix our attention upon either one to the exclusion of the other. Attempting to balance the two even for a short time will do more harm than good because it involves concentration. To live concentrated belongs (naturally!) to the natural plan, not the normal one. Such concentration would lead quickly to a slow-motion suicide because our attention is directed in the wrong way, not towards being peaceful. So when we become aware that two planes do exist or better, that a plane other than the natural one exists, some type of *modus vivendi* is required...how to alternate between the two...which works to our benefit. Reality is, of course, one and undivided, but we're speaking of two important ways of perceiving it. Note that this alteration is different from a dualistic way of thinking. To work on that level means concentrating on such-and-such a thing for some time and then moving to something else, a task which exhausts us quickly or makes us uptight, depending upon the disposition of each person. One person who seems to have balanced the two is David Henry Thoreau. A look at his **Journal**—by far the best source for insight into the man though not as well known by the public at large—reveals how intimately close he was to nature, that which is natural, for which he is famous. However, this does not lie at the heart of his attractiveness. While out and about in nature Thoreau gave birth, if you will, to a norm or standard by which to live, one that goes deeper than at first glance and has found universal appeal. He had a proclivity toward this but had to work hard even to the point of withdrawing from society at Walden Pond in order to bring it to fruition. Perhaps the most undetected fact about Thoreau are his countless citations from classical Greek and Roman authors which aided this fruition. The only problem with Thoreau and people like him is that this effort to discern a norm usually is a solitary affair, not a social one. However, it is offset by reason of the immense influence just one person has on society whether known like Thoreau or living in complete obscurity.

The difficulty of talking about the normal and the natural is that on the surface both look similar and are therefore difficult to pin down. We know a real difference exists, however, when we make the transition from that which is natural to that which is normal because it goes against our (natural) grain, and that brings up the issue of unknowability. Actually, *the* struggle of our lives is now underway which becomes more evident as time passes. This shift consists in a relinquishing of what has been familiar to us from birth to a realm which seems utterly foreign. Still, we are pulled in that direction because we're either fascinated by the unknown or disillusioned by experience. Even more important, we're not at peace yet have an inkling peace is our heritage. The task, then, is to become aware of where the natural and the normal meet; that point is out there but seldom is given the necessary attention. And this results in our being ignorant and confused about what's going on, especially as we age and our view of life changes.

Let's put this in a concrete situation. Recently a dear friend and his wife moved out West, both to take teaching jobs. They are quite accomplished in their own fields and always have lived rather focused lives, that is, sensitive to things spiritual. I will miss them, to be sure, but on another level no matter where they or other friends may go I remain "stuck" at home. Nevertheless, we all face the same issues. To put this in another way, whether here, out West or on Mars with Curiosity, we're dealing with the same stuff: different variations, but still it consists of stuff.

It's everywhere. This insight harkens back to the vanity of Ecclesiastes several pages ago but has a modern variation to it. In sum, all what I call "stuff" is found permeates the universe...inescapable, really, so much so that we apply the lowest common denominator to it, "natural," by reason of being out there, everywhere. Once we intuit this universality, there's something inherently boring about it. And so it goes, all very natural-like, regardless of where you happen to be. Stripping down to the lowest common denominator gets more intense the closer we see the natural for what it is, subject to the law of entropy. Not that it's a curse (though it can seem that way at first) but is part and parcel of the nature of things. Since it is natural, it is good, not evil.

Because the world...the universe...is full of natural stuff, no small wonder we think in accord with it and its laws. The next step, of course, is to identify ourselves with this stuff and follow in accord with where it leads us: again, the law of entropy or in our case, death. Just that fact that we entertain such an idea indicates that an alternative does exist, and this alternative flies in the face of criticism that our insights are wishful thinking, some kind of fancy. They persist despite all the criticism, and chances if pressed, are we'd die for them. This comes about by considering the human tendency to work against the law of entropy, to work from being pushed down to a sometimes desperate ascent in an upward direction. It creates a life long tension where we go against...rebel against...the grain of the natural. En route we hit upon rest areas which turn out to be temporary as when all goes well and we give little attention to our current situation. All this sounds perfectly fine, and it is true but only to a certain extent. Inevitably the tension reasserts itself and off we go until we pull into the next rest stop. We know, however, that these fits and starts can't last forever and as we get older, start to face the inevitable.

The notion of an alternative not based upon movement nor knowledge flies against all evidence to the obvious because our tiresome attempts at trying to ascend the heights persists, it might be helpful to explore this tendency. I believe the chief argument working on our behalf is the peace we have which, to borrow conventional religious terminology, lies beyond all understanding. That's what makes this quest all the more desirable. But we have to get move beyond fits and starts at it and make our abode there as permanent as possible. One fact becomes certain. We know this alternative which bestows peace (from above, if you will) is not hostile to the natural and doesn't engage in a wearisome leaping up from below to above. That means it must enjoy exemption from that tension we find everywhere in nature and even more important, free from entropy, the ultimate dissolution of this tension. Earlier in this essay the term "normal" was introduced as a counter-force to the natural, so let's spell it out further. The noun is derived from the Greek *nomos* meaning custom, law or usage. The verbal root is derived from *nemo* (to allot) and connotes what is proper or that which is assigned to someone. In ancient times it had a comprehensive range of meaning which embraces any kind of existing or accepted order, custom, usage or tradition. Admittedly at first I didn't have a clear idea as to what it meant originally though often I had come across the term in Greek texts. Even worse, I knew less as to how it contrasted with the term "natural." Now that I've struggled with it in this essay for some pages, the distinction begins to emerge more clearly. As for the difference between normal and natural, the first thing that strikes you is that the former commences where the latter leaves off. If that's the case, then the normal-again, this comes from a fundamental intuition which can't be "proven" just like our comprehensive peace can't be proven-stands above the natural and may be said to govern it. After all, it is a norm whose task is to govern.

Getting practical, perception of this "normal reality" only comes about through humility which is why people

deny it, even vigorously. Humility is a type of non-physical entropy where we've exhausted all our resources. After we've had practice in it, usually against our will, almost miraculously we find ourselves remaining alive but are stuck with the problem of having no place to go nor having anything to do. Humility imitates death yet does not involve physical annihilation. That which has been brought to humiliation, however, is the upward striving of everything normal within us. So why is this direction upward as opposed to say, one that's horizontal? Moving on that plane is synonymous with the natural (the horizontal is less susceptible to dealing with the pull of gravity) and, if you will, represents movement during most of the time when we're not in distress. Horizontal movement becomes vertical when anxiety mobilizes our energy to a given end.

The upward striving comes to the fore in a striking fashion when you look inside and see yourself in relationship with everything and everyone else, and that we call making comparisons. And the natural impulse is to be better or to have more than the other person, something we attribute naturally (†) to anything that is "up." Our very language expresses this expansive attitude, and the opposite ('down') applies when we fail. Between the two lies an infinitely great distance which causes permanent anxiety. Failure of falling "down" differs substantially from the kind of humility just noted. Because its end result of the latter consists in having no place to go, something somehow automatically dawns upon us which never can be articulated fully. It refuses to go away and takes up residence in our place of humiliation (NB: humility is more an abiding state whereas humiliation consists of those things and events which bring us to that state). As for this humiliation, it doesn't have to hang out there for all to see. It's more a hidden letting-go done in the open where everyone ends up, regardless.

So when we're humble—admittedly a poor way of putting it but we'll stick with this terminology for the sake of argument—we end up at the bottom, another word anathema to the natural world because it shows our mental and spiritual state of exhaustion. There's no more energy left to move upward; more importantly, we discover to our great surprise and relief that there's no desire to do so nor to acquire more energy. Certainly this isn't "natural" but turns out to be "normal" in the sense of *nomos* already pointed out. We have hit upon a *nomos* or law previously unknown and treat it like a hidden treasure which it is. Now, wherein consists our knowledge in this "normal" state? That's getting close to the theme of this essay, of where we want to move. It might be helpful to know that *nomos* alternately means a feeding place or pasture. Thus a norm does more to guide; it serves to nourish continuously. More on that later.

Experience of being humbled has a way of pointing out the truth, and we know the truth by reason of the hitherto unrealized sense of peace that comes over us, this after the initial shock has worn off. It does this not from our own devices but originates from somewhere outside ourselves which vouches for the reality of this experience where we join in as participants, not passive observers. Perhaps that's why so much doubt and skepticism exists about it; people simply are not at peace and don't know about this reality. Discovery of a reality responsible for our well-being like this is too good to be true, so it's *natural* to disavow it. And so not accepting a source other than ourselves is a particularly modern phenomenon. If people would relent, they would cease being concerned about everything natural and live according to this newly discovered norm...this new normal...without further ado. Yet a hidden anxiety lurks in the background. It appears that when at peace you don't have knowledge as commonly understood. Obviously you retain practical knowledge as to life in general, where things are located and how to use them, but that's pretty much it. So instead of advocating for ignorance, it's better to go after unknowability,

for that's where we stand in the grand scheme of things. Actually this unknowability is the starting point for a different type of knowledge, more immediate or not mediated by personal thoughts and opinions. To go there is a particularly scary venture for modern man.

Although we may not be able to comprehend this state of affairs as much as we'd like, a recourse exists. We can approximate it by the act of pretending it differs from not acting truthfully and can be observed in children at play. For the most part, children conform accurately to the reality they are pretending. At the same time they have a remarkable ability to retain their personal identity while playing, for example, cowboys and Indians. Furthermore, they can adopt spontaneously to a whole range of details with the requisite complexity for activating the game, all the while performing it at ease. If summoned by their parents to cease, without missing a beat the children stop their game and later resume from where they left off, all without reflection. This is an issue worth examining in and by itself. Suffice it to say here that the participatory is not confined to children nor do we lose it upon becoming adults. For example, we can pretend what life might be like from the vantage point of unknowability, of living without knowledge, on the plane where our intelligence is active. As noted above, the prime example of this is death. Without much difficulty we can pretend to be dead by sitting as still as possible, reduce our breathing and allow thoughts and the wandering of our imagination to leave off. What we get, then, is, of course, unknowability. At the same time we remain alive...very much so...but in a fashion quite unlike our previous way of living. To that we joyously discover that we had been dead while alive. Now that we are "dead," we find ourselves alive, very much so, but our manner of knowing has altered considerably.

A major problem presents itself right from the beginning. Without much difficulty we can attain that state of unknowability through pretending to be dead but remaining there for an extended period of time is another matter. Again, try it out and see what happens. Once we acclimatize ourselves to being devoid of thought (not the best way to put it, really, but it has some truth), we enter what can be described as a profound heaviness. It is so heavy, in fact, that we feel on the verge of being crushed. Of course we don't end up getting squished, but the feeling of it is inescapable. Now all sorts of thoughts and emotions emerge with astounding rapidity, as though the heaviness squishes out all kinds of thoughts left and right, up and down. The best approach is to ignore these things welling up from God-only-knows-where and not allow them to capture our attention. With some practice, this is doable. We can get more acclimatized to the heaviness experienced not unlike deep sea divers who descend gradually to the depths and take even more precautions when they ascend. In that state...condition...or whatever term we apply, the heaviness is equivalent to peace or the more extended experience of peace. And like children who have engaged in pretending, we retain memory of it in the supposed real world while all the while learning how to disentangle ourselves from it.

We require time to adjust to this experience of heaviness simply because it is so contrary to daily experience. It is only after familiarity with the state of unknowability that the reality begins to dawn upon us because differs profoundly from what we've come to accept as being natural. Actually thinking in terms of the two as separate sets us up for a fall because both run parallel to each other. It's a matter of right order, of which comes first. Usually the natural is posited in this role, but such is not the case as can be witnessed only from that "heavy" state of unknowability which had been described briefly. The verb "witnessed" is used deliberately as opposed to verbs related to sight. When you witness to something you not only see it but hand yourself over to the reality

perceived. Part of our experience with this “heaviness” is that what had been so part and parcel of our existence...natural...turns out to be otherwise. Indeed, it wouldn’t be far off the mark to designate it as alien. Such a claim requires verification, for we can take alien as synonymous with hostile. That’s where exposure to the realm of unknowability comes; it cannot be described as something natural to us.

So if we claim that which is natural ultimately is not hostile but is unbecoming to us, we’re bound to make our share of enemies. That’s not the goal in life, obviously, but that experience put in terms of pretending to die introduces a greater reality though one not visible to us. And that reality...if the “normal” one is taken as that which now sets the norm...sets the stage for proper behavior once we’ve exited that so-called heaviness that turns out to bestow a peace hitherto un-experienced. Because it’s impossible to shake ourselves free from the inroad of thoughts and images within that state designated as unknowability, we live a kind of truce, of being halfway between the natural and the normal. We know, however, that upon death, the two are reconciled fully because we had a foretaste of that when we pretended to die (hence the great peace). We also know that “life” after “death” isn’t a continuation of the natural one but is a life according to a new *nomos* which we leave un-described not out of ignorance but because we know it can’t be described. And to describe it in so-called traditional forms (heaven, etc.) is to bring over the natural into the normal, a confusion to be avoided so it won’t be passed on to other persons.

Now the normal into which we had been initiated—an accurate word because it speaks of action coming from outside ourselves and for our benefit—gradually takes over the natural through our recollective faculty. And the memory over time has garnered insights from the normal realm of unknowability and projects them into the natural one to which we return and spend most of our lives. So memory of our time spent in the realm of unknowability is like a presence in far-off land. In actuality the land in which we find ourselves...our natural surroundings...is the true far-off land. Our alteration between the natural and the normal shows that we perceive two different types of movement: the natural one of striving for stuff which moves from innate poverty to fulness or from down to up and the normal one of not striving for stuff which already is full because that is the characteristic of its state. Yet once more, an appeal to experience bears this out.

A note as to major biblical experience of memory...All encounters with the divine, Old or New Testaments, are brief. They happen so quickly that barely the people involved know what is transpiring. Later they set it down in the record book of their memories where it abides fresh as could be and immune from the passage of time. So we have here examples of people who must continue to live their daily lives influenced by a short experience existing in the past yet exerting influence in the presence. Already three people were described who are sharing in this reality at the present moment.

Even though we abide in the normal realm for small periods of time, our time there is enough to transform our natural lives and invites us to return as often as possible. The normal realm is the one of unknowability and is radically different from “natural” knowledge and ways of thinking. However, there remains a mode of thinking that is permitted full reign. That mode consists in recollection of personal failures, follies or generally speaking, unflattering memories of ourselves. The first reaction to this one of *natural* repulsion, that it is a form of self-flagellation or the product of a severe inferiority complex looking for pity wherever it can be found. A closer look

at our experience with unknowability reveals that literally we know nothing yet are at level of peace found nowhere else. This itself is a knowledge freed from any and all upward striving, typical of the normal way of doing things. So when we're freed from this way of life, so un-natural that it's natural (!) for our minds to be filled with memories of how we failed in that regard. Such memories, of course, are innumerable, too numerous and embarrassing to admit. Yet because we've been exposed to unknowability and the normal plane of reality, everything has come to a sudden standstill. In brief, we are freed from striving upwards and hence lack tension so typical of the natural world. That suggests that already we achieved our goal, not fully but seminally. Everything natural from this point appears inferior or appears to tend downward from us.

Those recollections of past humiliations are not thoughts in the usual sense but resemble moving images to which we dispose ourselves and have an abiding presence compared to the transitory nature of thoughts and the emotions that flow from them. Their presence precludes thought which means they have a kind of subterranean existence larger than ourselves. The major difference between recollections and thoughts of humiliations is that the former orients us towards that peace of the normal state whereas thoughts of humiliations do not orientate us but pull us upward, if you will, in a desire to escape them and from which there is no escape, just more thoughts and subsequent emotions. Such is the natural condition.

This essay has consisted in a series of snapshots in an attempt to behold the difference between the natural and normal where unknowability is the chief characteristic of the latter. It did a long of circling around the subject because admittedly the issue a bit slippery to get our hands on, so the approach has been trying to look at it first from this angle and then that one. Thus it is not so much systematic as descriptive culled in part from the experience of people over the years. The text is not complete but is more an outline. One hope running through it is to counter an almost inbuilt presumption that we must suffer in our "natural" state to advance spiritually instead of focusing upon the recovery of our "normal" nature. Suffering comes, as we know, when we give free reign to the natural desire for existence depicted as upward movement. It's suffering because to strive upward goes against the law of gravity with the ever present danger of falling down. But the plane of the normal is not "up there" but present already "below." At first glance it appears as death and indeed is so for that which is natural: no striving, no life, which is a mis-perception. Once initiation into the normal has taken root...and roots are "normally" below, not above...we are nourished from there as noted above through the Greek word *nomos*.

And so the observations, scattered as they may be, may be summed up by a verse from Psalm Sixteen: "I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved" [vs. 8]. The Hebrew verb for "keep" is *shavah* which has a fuller sense than simply putting in place. It connotes being equal, of resembling and of making level. Thus the psalmist "puts" the Lord on the same plane as he which is not that he reduces the Lord to that which is human. *Shavah* represents being on the plane of the normal, not the natural, minus imagery of either striving upward or descending downward. Note that the verb is used with the preposition "before" as in "before me," right out there, again, on the same plane. The Lord's "right hand" is more or less the same as this "before" but with the difference that both the Lord and the psalmist occupy the same place, if you will. So when the psalmist claims that he "shall not be moved" he means that he will not strive upward, the natural impulse to follow, but will know it leads no where. Instead, the psalmist as representative of us all will continue with *shavah*, of continuing with the "normal" plane despite evidence to the contrary.

+ The End +

Please allow a postscript which is a kind of after-thought. This back and forth between what is natural and what is normal brought to mind a long-held desire to compare **Republic** of Plato and the **Rule** of St. Benedict, two critical documents of governance in the Western world. Whether or not that will come to pass is not the issue here. Rather, both documents offer plans of how human beings should live together...politically in the fundamental sense of the word. As for the **Republic**, the Greek term is **Politeia** (from which 'politics' is derived). As for the **Rule**, the Latin term is **Regula**. If you read through both, you're struck by the frequent mention of human vices and follies which they seek to remedy. While obviously they differ, **Politeia** and **Regula** are significant by reason of their titles. Both may be defined as *nomoi* in order to counter the infirm human condition and build it up not in isolation but in a "political" environment: either a city-state (*polis*) or a monastery (an image of the heavenly Jerusalem). So in conclusion, the transition from natural to normal may be put as a "political" one, where an individual learns to reside within a *polis* or a city-state in the ancient Greek sense of the term. Not that such a life is possible nor desirable but worth further consideration as it can help us today.