Discernment In The Digital Age

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Readings

*“Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”*

*“When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”*

*“And Moses said, “Here I am.”*

*“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.*

*“The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”*

*“But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I am that I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”*

**Exodus 3:1-14**

*“And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,' and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory; for all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the preeminence, who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. Thus, when God doth work who shall prevent it? And this I knew experimentally.”*

George Fox, 1647

Thus far the readings for today suggest that we’re hearing about two apparently ordinary but somewhat odd men, at very different points in history, both claiming to have heard the voice of God. Both are fairly certain – and clear – about what they have experienced – what they have seen and/or heard. And both incidents are foundational to two important religious traditions: Judaism and Quakerism.

It’s interesting to think that if Moses and George Fox reported these experiences today, we would likely describe both of these men as psychotic, and suggest that psychiatric care combined with strong psychotropic medications might help them manage their conditions, preventing further decompensation and potential possible threats to either themselves or the general public.

And yet, there’s something about the experiences of both of these men that people have found – either for centuries, (in the case of George Fox) or millenia, (in the case of Moses) – extremely compelling. There’s something “there,” there. Something they have discerned as inescapable truth. Something they are very certain about. Something they have experienced so directly, so powerfully – so “experimentally” as George Fox describes it – that it cannot be denied, and claims an overwhelming place in shaping the works and deeds that dominate the remainder of these men’s lives.

What precisely is going on in these two stories? I’m not exactly sure. Neither are the best historians or psychologists. So as is often the case for me, to make sense of these strange dimensions of the “theistic, desert religions,” I often look to other faith traditions for help in finding the subtler lessons that can be extracted from these stories. In this current instance, Buddhism, and the teachings of Ajaan Lee, offer me some insight. Lee wrote:

*“*What does discernment come from? You might compare it with learning to become a potter, a tailor, or a basket weaver. The teacher will start out by telling you how to make a pot, sew a shirt or a pair of pants, or weave different patterns, but the proportions and beauty of the object you make will have to depend on your own powers of observation. Suppose you weave a basket and then take a good look at its proportions, to see if it’s too short or too tall. If it’s too short, weave another one, a little taller, and then take a good look at it to see if there’s anything that still needs improving, to see if it’s too thin or too fat. Then weave another one, better-looking than the last. Keep this up until you have one that’s as beautiful and well-proportioned as possible, one with nothing to criticize from any angle.

“What you’ve done is to learn from your own actions. As for your previous efforts, you needn’t concern yourself with them any longer. Throw them out. This is a sense of discernment that arises of its own accord, an ingenuity and sense of judgment that come not from anything your teachers have taught you, but from observing and evaluating on your own the object that you yourself have made.”

From Inner Strength by Buddhist teacher Ajaan Lee

Now, hopefully, you are as confused as I am.

So, let’s take a deeper dive.

How do we know anything? Really know it? I’m certainly not going to answer that core epistemological question in a brief Sunday sermon. But I am going to wrestle with this question for a few minutes in the context of an age and an environment in which we have increased access to virtual tools that claim to connect us to absolutely everything we know or might ever want to know. It is an age, however, that leaves me increasingly concerned that in thinking we can know everything, we actually are at risk of being able to discern less and less with any certainty – with less and less of the sureness that Moses and George Fox had about what they knew, as Fox put it, “experimentally.”

Today, we have access to information tools that we could not have dreamed of, even 25 years ago. The power of the digital age provides access to storehouses of data and knowledge to which we can have immediate, highly gratifying access. It’s actually addictive. How many times, in the last few months, have I been engaged in a thoughtful conversation at dinner or at work, come to an impasse about what we know or a disagreement about the facts, and pulled out my laptop or smartphone for that “GAC” – a “Google Assisted Conversation.”

When I was younger, we would have headed to the library to research such questions. Libraries were warehouses of information and knowledge; the more books a library could boast they held on their shelves, the more knowledge they could claim they stored. All that has changed. The internet offers access to tens of thousands of times more knowledge than even the biggest libraries, and libraries – to survive – are becoming places not where we merely store knowledge, but actually explore it. (But that’s a different topic for a different day.)

With access to endless information on just about any subject, one would think that the digital information age would make us keener, smarter, more informed people – that increased access to knowledge would make us ever better knowers of the truth, and ever better able to discern experiential knowledge from inexperienced uncertainty. We should be better able to test what we may hear from a burning bush, or to know on sight the perfect woven basket.

Sadly, I think that all too often we’re going in the opposite direction. With the digital age has come the desire to speed up communications, accelerate certainty, truncate complexity and obscure pathways to discernment.

Take Twitter, for example. I love Twitter. I Tweet multiple times a day, usually on work-related topics about homelessness. You can even follow me on Twitter at @davidwseattle. I like to think that people read my tweets, that I influence some of what they think about and how they think about it, and bring more focus and compassion to their attitudes about homelessness.

But despite all my efforts to be a good social media maven, I may not be having the impact or influence I am seeking. What happens to communication, to information, to conveying the facts – to the activities of discernment – when you are limited to 140 characters of text?

If I had been tweeting when Moses was around and saw the burning bush, I might have tweeted the following:

*Skeptical shepherd distracted by bizarre burning bush hears voice telling him it’s God, and that it’s his destiny to be the liberator of enslaved Israelites.*

Or, for George Fox, I might have written:

*Millenarian extremist falls into depressive funk, determines his future happiness and security is dependent on disembodied voices.*

What have I communicated there? How accurate is that information? How complete? How subjective? What would a reader conclude from such a truncated telling of two such complicated stories?

I think that how we communicate about what we know has deteriorated significantly over the last century. Within the past 130 years or so, telephone calls replaced face-to-face conversations and the art of writing letters. How much did we lose when that face-to-face communication vanished, or when the carefully contemplated construction of a letter gave way to much more casual words spoken from a distance? Before the start of this century, even voice-to-voice conversations were replaced by emails – those truncated communications that let your fingers do the talking, and are so easily misconstrued or misunderstood as the nuance of the letter or even the tone of a phone call are completely lost.

Yet it doesn’t even stop there. For any of you with young people in your lives – and for me it’s two 11 year olds and a 14 year old, phone calls and even emails are completely passe. Even tweeting takes too much time and too many keystrokes. The easiest way to get their attention is to text them, and the barebones responses that I get tell me little more than that they are alive and still have a firm grip on their devices.

*How was school today?*

*K.*

*What would you like for dinner?*

*Pizza.*

*We’re going to eat at home tonight.*

*OMG, yuck.*

*That’s rude.*

*LOL.*

Other than the fact that these kids are still breathing, and a bit rude, what can we discern about them? And what can they actually discern about us, or about the world around them? It’s scary to think about the answers to these questions.

To make matters still worse, the tools they – and many of us – are using are SOOOO addictive. We have a rule at the dinner table – no devices. Just conversation. It’s amazing that, after the third time the 14 year old in my life excuses himself to go to the bathroom during dinner, how quickly you can interrupt that behavior by telling him it’s perfectly okay to go to the bathroom, but please leave your smartphone on the table. Suddenly, the needs of the bladder have vanished.

Maybe we’re just not with the times. Maybe my parents thought I was addicted to reading books, that I had a hard time putting them down to come to dinner or turn off the lights at night. That’s certainly possible. But think about the rich experience – the knowledge – I was deriving from diving wholly into the world of a book and the subtle fabric of a well-crafted story. How much more I could learn and know from reading a great novel or non-fiction title than I could derive from hovering in front of computer screen and joining the 2,125,381,326 other people around the globe who have watched Gagnam Style on YouTube. (And no, I’m not making that number up!)

What concerns me here is that by connecting with each other virtually, by allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by the amount of information that’s out there and our access to it, we’re actually disconnecting from ourselves, each other, and from the realities of our experiences. Experiences that can lead to the intensity of finding a burning bush or the experimental knowledge that comes from the painful search for connection to the things that should mean the most to us.

This is not even taking into consideration the accuracy or the integrity of the information we can find in the world of virtual knowledge. So much of what is out there is so truncated, so fabricated, and so pre-digested that our ability to trust the experiences we do have with all the data coming at us are reduced to almost nil. And yet we eat it up, trusting that if we find it on the internet or other forms of 21st century communication, and if it gets repeated enough there, it must be true. There’s a reason that more than 30% of Americans believe Barack Obama is a Kenyan Muslim. It’s because Fox News keeps telling us that that’s the truth, “fair and balanced.” Even I fall prey to these challenges. A friend posted on Facebook recently that actress Betty White had died at the age of 92. When I looked up from my laptop and told my husband the sad news, a quick check of the facts by him (also on the internet), proved the Facebook posting completely wrong.

What is all this doing to our ability to discern the truth? Well, it isn’t helping. With so much information coming at us with such speed, with our incessant desire to reduce those communications to briefer and briefer sound bites or keystrokes, what is happening not only to our ability to know fact from fiction, but to know for ourselves what is real? How do we discern what our truths are, how we know them to be real, and how they continue to unfold in our lives?

It’s becoming harder and harder.

Malcom Gladwell, the brilliant author and story teller, has written an informative book called Outliers. In this book, he looks at those rare individuals who really KNOW what they are about and what they do, and are able to do it brilliantly. He uncovers the very simple truth about how it is they have gotten so good at what they do. It’s purely this: They have done it tens of thousands of times, and mastered the skills and knowledge required to do what they do really well.

We’re back to our Buddhist basket weaver: Do something enough times, and you will get better at it. Do it even more times, and you will get great at it. Do it endlesslessly, and you may actually create the perfect basket.

How real is the risk that in the digital age we have lost this ability to achieve mastery? To be so familiar with something that we really KNOW it, that we really can discern the truth about it, that we can trust a deep, experimental knowledge that was accessible to Moses and George Fox – a knowledge that yields insight, certainty and understanding?

This leads me to contemplate my own life, and to wonder about where in my life I have found the experimental knowledge that leads to the certainty that grounds my experience of the world, and keeps me from drowning in existential uncertainty, forever questioning what is real and what is fabrication. It’s certainly not in what I read in the newspaper or can find on the internet. I have to get closer to it than that. I have to be able to feel it, to experience it, to taste it, to touch it. And that means getting up from my computer screen, putting down my smart phone, to cease and desist from tweeting, texting and Instagramming in order to bask in an experience long enough to trust my experimental knowledge of the world, long enough to discern the wonder of a burning bush that is not consumed or a still small voice within that tells me to trust my place in the world.

So where do I find that? It’s actually all around me if I only just pause long enough to hear it, to see it, to smell it, to taste it. I find it, for example, in long walks on the beach. There I experience the rhythm of the tides, the hovering and dives of the kingfisher, the smell of low tide, the slow but steady decay of a glacial bluff in repeated winter storms. But I must allow myself to listen to and absorb those truths – to open myself to the songs of the universe around me – or else I will continue to miss the experiences that lie at the core of my experimental knowledge. I’ll walk right by the burning bush without even noticing that it’s there. And I still do that all the time.

This past summer, an old friend from my New York City days came out to visit me on Guemes Island. He’s a dyed-in-the-wool city boy, and I enjoy showing him (or so I thought), a world where the pace and priorities are different, and what matters is all around you to soak up and enjoy, if you pause long enough to appreciate it. My husband, Paul and I took him out one morning in our little boat, and headed towards Washington Park, with a planned destination of Deception Pass. A familiar trip I have done many, many times.

As we motored along, my New York friend said to me, “I think I just saw a whale.” I shrugged it off. “My friend,” I said, “perhaps you just saw a big fish. Or maybe a porpoise. But so close to Anacortes? Not a whale.” I was certain in my un-knowing. And I was set in my route, not open to something that might surprise me. A minute later, he said, “There it is again.” So, Paul stopped the engine long enough to turn and allow us to search out over the water where he was pointing. And there they were. Not just a whale, but an entire pod of Orcas. In our rush to get to Deception Pass, we completely missed what was right in front of us. Realizing we were in the midst of this slowly moving pod of magnificent creatures, we kept the engine off and drifted along with them in the outgoing tide. It was magical. You could hear their breathing, and see their plumes. You could watch them slap the water with their giant flukes, sending messages to each other that I could not comprehend. The rhythm of their rising to the surface and gently breaking out of the water was mesmerizing.

For those brief moments that they swam alongside our drifting boat, I discerned a very powerful sense of connectedness to the world, of a rootedness in a place, of a certainty of wonder and pleasure, tempered only by my awareness of the fragile balance in which these magnificent creatures hang. The whales were, in a way, a sort of burning bush of divinity that was passing directly through my consciousness.

We never made it to Deception Pass. But we returned to Guemes Island with a deep, wonderous appreciation for this place in which we live and the brilliant potency of the world around us. We were giddy with the contact we had made with something so much greater than ourselves. In their own way, these whales were singing the ancient song of, “I am that I am.” On that day the whales helped me hear sounds of the planet’s music, and experience all over again the extraordinary power of the web of creation of which we are but a tiny thread. These were creatures that, over many, many thousands of years passing, had become a perfect woven basket.

Nothing that I could ever find on the internet, nothing that I could email or text, will ever come close to the power and extraordinary grace of those moments floating alongside the Orcas. Nothing.

And this I know, “experimentally.”