



Spiritual Knowing: A Case Study in Entitlement

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Abstract

Not everything known can be said. This paper will explore one aspect of this voiceless realm: what we believe we know spiritually, but lack words to express. Hidden knowing in this article refers to a felt sense of what is true, but to some degree it remains hidden from the knower. It may or may not be true but it is something about which the person feels certain.

This *hidden* knowing can be contrasted with *aware* knowing. Aware knowing, happens when this sense of what is true becomes a belief, whether true or not, and can be articulated. One aspect of hidden knowing is spiritual knowing, which will be applied to a common problem in pastoral ministry – that of unhealthy entitlement.

Introduction

Pastoral ministry is complicated by unseen psychological and spiritual dynamics. One example is the observation that people have an attachment style, usually first to parents and later to God. This paper explores the idea of unconscious spiritual knowing², which is illustrated by a case study in entitlement which explores ways in which narcissism can be a disruptive dynamic in the church. There are also some tentative suggestions of a way forward.

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² This hidden and spiritual knowing is a non-epistemological account of knowing, with the focus more on the feeling of knowing which leads to certainty, than any question of it being true. This is important to explore because many religious people have questionable beliefs.

The Concept of Hidden and Spiritual Knowing

Developmentally, thought comes first, and only later is thought expressed in language. This has implications for how something is learnt. Our first learning is implicit, what I have called hidden learning. This can be compared with Sigmund Freud's understanding of the unconscious. He asserted that "unconsciousness is a regular and inevitable phase in the processes constituting our psychical activity; every psychical act begins as an unconscious one, and it may either remain so or go on developing into consciousness, according to whether it meets with resistance or not." (Freud 1912, p. 264). He conceived a wide range of mental processes, occurring automatically and not available to mental reflection. This is more inclusive than hidden knowing and includes memories, motivations, repressed feelings, desires, instincts, automatic skills, subliminal perceptions, habits and automatic reactions (Westen 1999). In this article, I am discussing an implicit learning model, how we learn things before or without words, and not a 'grab bag' of unconscious processes.

Our earliest learning has been described in various ways. The term in academic psychology is 'implicit learning'. Reber (1996) explains that "implicit learning is the acquisition of knowledge that takes place largely independently of conscious attempts to learn and largely in the absence of explicit knowledge about what was acquired" (p. 5). There have been other attempts to describe this non-verbal learning including tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958), emotional or limbic learning (in the coherence therapy of Ecker et al., 2013), and *habitus* in the writings of Bourdieu (1977, etc.). These writers offer different perspectives of the same experience. I am proposing that hidden and spiritual knowing also describes this same reality but introduces a spiritual dimension to the analysis. This may be helpful because previous research has not been applied to Christian ministry. The only exception is James Lewis (2015) who applied *habitus* to the spiritual formation in a PhD thesis.

The Importance of Hidden and Spiritual Knowing

Hidden knowing usually occurs before we can use words. This is illustrated in the following example:

Ben³ was neglected as a child. His mother was dependent on heroin. Eventually Family Services removed him and placed him in foster care at age three. He was raised in a loving family but his early learning was along the lines of, "There is nothing important about my needs. I will not be protected. Eventually anyone I love will leave me." It is easy to see the emotional logic of such early lessons in life. But Ben lacks words for what he has learnt; he simply assumes it to be true.

All this has consequences. What we 'know' in this way always feels true. Such non-conscious knowing is powerful, because it is mostly beneath awareness and can determine both attitudes and behaviour, functioning somewhat like a puppet master who pulls the strings. Ben, for example, would have low self-esteem and be insecure in his romantic relationships. Additionally, a conviction of this kind may be so deeply held that Ben might sabotage himself to maintain that 'truth'.

³ I am drawing on my practice as a clinical psychologist, using cases to illustrate concepts, but not with specific de-identified examples in mind. Hence the cases are typical and realistic, reflecting what is familiar to anyone experienced in pastoral or counselling ministry.

This also has implications for an individual's spiritual beliefs, as shown in the following example:

Sally-Anne was exposed to violence from her single mother's changing partners. In her late teens Sally-Anne became a Christian but could only believe in a punitive God, "I know I fall short, I feel so guilty. I am only worthy of punishment by God."

Both Ben and Sally-Anne show hidden knowing⁴, through neglect and violence at an early age. But Sally-Anne also has a legacy of spiritual knowing - what she feels is true about God. She has no appreciation of the emotional steps leading to her beliefs. But these assumptions will continue to operate regardless of any teaching to the contrary about a loving God.

Attachment theory is a good example of hidden knowing. Initially the attachment model described the relationship between an infant and carer (usually the mother). A distinction was made between healthy attachments and different kinds of anxious attachments. The model suggested four patterns of attachment: avoidant, secure, ambivalent and disorganized (Cohen 1996). The implications of such early learning have been explored in relation to later relationships in childhood and adolescence (Crittendon 2000). This model has also been applied to a believer's relationship to God. This has been helpful to understand difficulties in developing a trusting spiritual relationship (Granqvist et al., 2010; Miner 2009). The following example shows how an attachment pattern can apply to God:

Sandy was raised in a series of foster homes. She had an anxious attachment style and when she became a Christian this also became evident in her relationship with God, "I find it hard to believe I am saved. I keep thinking I will sin and God will reject me."

Attachment theory is fundamentally about dyadic relationships. The realm of hidden and spiritual knowing is broader. The problem of entitlement in ministry can illustrate aspects of such knowing.

Unbalanced Expectations

Ministry is surrounded by expectations. How can this be a problem? It depends, naturally, on the expectation. High expectations can lead to difficult relationship problems – in ministry, pastoral care or in general.

Expectations bring two potential difficulties. First, expectations can be exaggerated. Much more is expected than received in a pastoral relationship. Second, it is possible to expect something that is spiritually or psychologically impossible. We can identify some familiar patterns in pastoral relationships:

a) *A lack of 'give and take'*. We commonly see one-sided unrealistic expectations in pastoral ministry.

Rodney was called to pastor a small rural congregation. He came with the expectation that he would work to support himself, since the stipend offered was well below a living income. However, the workload was in excess of 60 hours a week. Rodney tried to do this but soon 'burnt out' in ministry, resigned and returned to working as an electrician. The excessive expectations were a major factor to what he considered to be his failure in ministry.

⁴ 'Hidden knowing' is used in the sense of 'hidden beliefs,' which can be wrong. I am trying to convey the sense that such a belief, mostly unexpressed, actually feels true.

b) *What is impossible.* 'Mind reading' is a common problem in relationships. And this difficulty replicates in pastoral ministry.

Mary was on the pastoral team in a large Pentecostal church. The wife of one of the key lay leaders went to hospital with appendicitis, but no one told Mary. She was expected to know, visit her and to offer prayer. The senior pastor called Mary into his office to hold her accountable. This expectation of a 'hot line' to the Almighty is unrealistic. However, it is conceivable, that on the particular day when Mary was praying she did get an intuition to enquire about Mrs Jones. But this 'one off' success does not solve the communication difficulty in the church; it just increases everyone's expectations of divine intervention!

There is nothing wrong with realistic expectations in ministry. The problems begin when an expectation becomes divorced from what is humanly possible. And there may be some hidden dynamics, which can make the pastoral situation even more complex.

Entitlement in Ministry

The dynamic that often underlies both a lack of give and take and unrealistic expectations is *entitlement*. This can be understood as assuming a right to some benefit from a relationship. While it is possible to expect too little, as a result of lacking a healthy sense of self-worth or reciprocity in relationships (Craigie & Tan 1989), extravagant expectations are a bigger problem. Exaggerated expectations are commonly seen in situations of ministry. These have the potential to be destructive of pastoral relationships.

Entitlement as a symptom is commonly coupled with personality disorder (for the criteria see American Psychiatric Association 2013). The narcissistic personality is highly self-centred, hyper-sensitive, and grandiose. This kind of person commonly has unrealistic expectations that 'What is mine is mine; what is yours is mine as well!' The emotionally unstable borderline personality has a tendency to believe in magic, expecting the impossible. There is an immature dimension to both personalities, especially with lower functioning individuals, and entitlement is a key indicator of such disturbance. This dynamic can be seen attitudes to ministry:

Stanley was the senior pastor of a mega-church. He believed in a 'Gospel of Prosperity,' which in his mind meant that he was entitled to use church finances for any personal need. This included driving a new luxury car. Such extravagance led to conflict with his lay leadership. Stanley was contemptuous of their 'interference,' and 'any distraction' from the call of God.

Solomon identified 'assertive entitlement' as a reversion to the infantile fantasy of 'I am the centre of the world'. It follows that others are expected to be perfectly responsive to any needs (Solomon 1989, p. 50). The psychoanalyst Kohut (1971) explored rage and shame in the narcissistic personality. Recently there has been considerable media attention to Donald Trump's 'thin skin' in which he reacts in an angry manner to any perceived slight. Indeed, Trump has been frequently described as narcissistic. In Kohut's understanding, Trump would illustrate both rage and contempt for other in response to any threat to a vulnerable self. Hargrave (2000) thought that children from dysfunctional families may become adults exhibiting both rage and a sense of entitlement. This legacy plays out in destructive ways in dependent relationships.

Perhaps the best description of this psychological reality is by Jeff Young (with Klosko 1993), who developed “schema therapy.” He distinguished between spoiled and dependent entitlement. In spoiled entitlement people take what they want with no regard for others or even guilt. Such a person has no history of mutuality or taking responsibility - only of being indulged by a parent. The child ends up in control! This kind of entitlement leads to unresolved conflict (Stevens 2001).

Dependent entitlement, on the other hand, can arise from both unbalanced and unrealistic expectations. This individual believes their needs *should* be met. This is natural for a child who depends on parents for the normal meeting of needs; however, most children grow up and become adults assuming responsibility for others. But childlike expectations remain in those with dependent entitlement. Indeed, a possible explanation of this is that the child was indulged in order for them *to depend* on a parent. This dependent entitlement is typical of borderline personality disorder and contributes to highly unstable emotional swings.

Irrational rage is a key indicator. Unrealistic expectations can be the drivers for this anger. It may be experienced as a passive aggressive cycle, but inevitably, there is disappointment at the outset. Then rage ensues. No one can meet all the needs of another individual, in either ministry or a committed relationship. The knee-jerk angry reaction is completely predictable: both because exaggerated needs remain unmet and responding with anger feels empowering. The following case illustrates a familiar pastoral problem that lead to disruption in church life:

Nancy was counselling Kylie, a young single mother, who had problems with alcohol and recreational drug use. Family services were threatening to remove her two young children. Kylie had recently become a Christian and was making progress with the support of her Bible study group. Nancy had twice weekly counselling sessions with Kylie who became ‘clingy’ and was soon requesting daily contact by phone. Her mood was very unstable and she would resort to cutting herself and threatening suicide. Naturally, all this added to the concerns of the child protection worker. While Nancy did what she could, it was not enough, and Kylie would have what Nancy called ‘adult tantrums,’ which were becoming frightening to reception and administration staff at the church.

There is no easy way out of this. Once a person is convinced of the ‘sacredness’ of their needs the consequence is entitled dependency. A dependent person needs others, but without entitlement feels grateful for what is given. There is no extreme anger, though perhaps disappointment, if needs are not met. But someone with entitled dependency does not have this capacity for a reciprocal relationship. What is expected is a ‘one-way street’ to the meeting ‘of my needs’.

Perhaps even more worrying is when this psychological dynamic is spiritualized. Christian versions of entitlement are rife in the life of the church. This can be justified by idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible and even ministry precedents. It is a toxic mix. This spiritualizing is illustrated in the following example:

There was a vocal group in Stanley’s church who advocated ‘name and claim healing’. While there were occasional dramatic healings, it was by no means predictable. The pastor of the young adults group blamed the senior pastor for a lack of faith. In this young pastor’s mind, this was the reason why some people in the church were not healed. The result was conflict and some disillusionment in the

church. The young leader felt he was entitled to lead a break-away group of young people to begin his own church.

There is no simple way forward to dealing with the problem of entitlement. We can reduce confusion, however, by naming the problem and identifying typical dynamics. It helps to realize that dependent entitlement reflects unconscious hidden knowing, and in some cases dysfunctional spiritual knowing.

Hidden and Spiritual Knowing

Let's go back to Kylie, the young single mother. I will explore Kylie's history to see what shaped her 'neediness'. Kylie's mother was dependent on alcohol, and was emotionally unstable. Parenting was unreliable. Sometimes her mother would 'over-indulge' Kylie with rich food, give attention that was too stimulating, and overwhelming, saying things like "You are my little baby. Let mummy love you." But when her mother was intoxicated or 'sleeping it off', Kylie's basic needs went unmet. All this is a toxic mix, and Kylie's hidden knowing was dysfunctional. This included the following core beliefs:

- a) Love is *unreliable*.
- b) My needs are *all* important. Nothing else matters (including anyone else's needs).
- c) Needs must be *completely* met, it is 'all or nothing'.
- d) No one will pay any attention to me unless I am *dramatic* in conveying my needs.
- e) Anyone who claims to love me is *responsible to meet all* my needs.
- f) I must *attach* strongly to any person offering care.
- g) If my expectations are not met, my *rage* is justified and I must *punish* anyone whom I expect to love me.

These are a series of half-truths. None can be defended on rational grounds. But because all have been learned, in effect now 'known,' they have become true-for-Kylie, therefore dominating the way she relates to others.

This is not the end of the story. Kylie became a Christian. It was a genuine conversion. Now what happens to her hidden knowing? She simply transferred her highest expectations to God. Immature people become immature Christians. Low functioning people become low functioning Christians. There is nothing surprising here, as every Christian leader knows from experience.

In her new faith, Kylie expected a lot from God. This soon became a 'battle ground' for a volatile spiritual relationship. There were frequent explosions sparked by the belief "God did not come through for me".

Hidden knowing is known to be hard to change. But there is hope from a new advance in the neurosciences, which I will mention briefly.

A Way Forward?

Research in the neurosciences is expanding and becoming more influential in areas never previously considered relevant. I will briefly touch on two findings. First, neuroscientific research shows that the brain is capable of learning without words. Information is non-cognitively processed in many areas of the brain. What might be called 'primitive' parts of the brain such as brain stem, mid-brain, and limbic system, can all be sites of learning, generally without a strong connection to the language center in the frontal cortex (Grossberg 2009). Second, there has also been an exciting advance called 'memory reconsolidation' (for a review see Nader & Einarsson 2010). Essentially,

this refers to a process of re-learning. The new replaces the old through a process that involves juxtaposition - a clash between what is expected, and something new that is experienced. This appears to loosen the associated learning, and allows for learning something different from the original unconscious expectation.

Hidden knowing does not easily change. It does not respond well even to a new truth, even when endlessly reinforced, but it does respond to contradictory truths brought to awareness and held simultaneously.

Most religious leaders have seen the truth of this through testimonies of dramatic conversion experiences. The traditional 'sinner saved by grace' is a good example of a juxtaposition of two contradictory truths: sinner condemned by God, and grace to be saved by God. But a conversion may be to any cause such as Green Peace, Marxism, or ISIS. I suspect that memory reconsolidation is a neutral mechanism. It can be a path to good or evil. Here is an example that illustrates this:

Eli was taken into care at six years of age when her single mother could not care for her. Her mother was an alcoholic with underlying schizophrenia. So her early care was chaotic and undermined any sense of her self-worth. Eli was then fostered into the family of a pastor, and raised in church circles. She was automatically part of youth groups, as the pastor's family tends to be involved in church activities. Eli's faith became real through a Cursillo retreat when she was 17. She found her realization of faith helped her previous low self-esteem, "I felt the love of God. Suddenly I had value as a person."

Eli's story in one form or another is common. Eli's prior hidden knowing was negative. This was the consequence of a lack of consistent care by a distracted mother in her earliest years. Then there was counter learning from being raised in a healthy family. But it was not enough to erase her earliest knowing. The second chance of new spiritual knowing came through the retreat with memory reconsolidation, and a vivid awareness of God's love. This provided the juxtaposition between feeling worthless, and God valuing her enough for Christ to sacrifice himself for her. The important connection is that a transforming truth must first of all be experiential – a truth for me!

There must be other pathways to profound change. Some resources may be found in the spiritual disciplines, and the contemplative traditions, for example, the Ignatian approach in which there is an attempt to visualize and participate in gospel scenes. Perhaps we can become more alert for signs of dramatic change that can be understood in terms of memory reconsolidation. While it is possible that such a potential for relearning has been adaptive in terms of evolution, it also seems likely that God uses this for spiritual growth. But there is a lot more research to be done here before coming to any firm conclusions.

Conclusion

There is a whole realm that remains unspoken. In this article this has been labeled hidden knowing, which is contrasted with aware knowing. An area of this is spiritual knowing. The dynamics of this implicit learning based theory have been illustrated by examining a sense of unhealthy entitlement related to Christian ministry.

Is spiritual knowing a revolutionary concept? This seems a rash claim. In the spirit of 'fools rush in' I will suggest or propose that potentially this knowing provides a different way of approaching fundamental Christian disciplines: liturgy and sacraments, spiritual direction, Christian counselling, Christian education, preaching and Christian

leadership⁵. It is a learning based theory of why we assume things in a range of spiritually relevant areas. It also offers some techniques to discover and hopefully change such beliefs – often restrictive and sometimes destructive. Hopefully, this understanding of spiritual knowing will be of interest to anyone in ministry or working in these disciplines.

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⁵ I am currently writing a book on hidden and spiritual knowing that explores the implications for a range of Christian ministries.

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