

Learning ignorance

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My daughter is in seventh grade, next year she will be in eighth. She tells me this means she will be the King of Middle School. She will go to a leadership camp and learn what it means to cultivate leadership qualities in order to be a good king for the underlings in sixth and seventh grade.

And then she will graduate middle school and it's back to the bottom of the pecking order—the lowly freshmen of high school, a sudden and abrupt drop in social status. One minute you're the prince—the next, a pauper. Just when you think you've learned everything there is to know comes the swift reminder you are only just beginning.

Out here in the real world, things operate similarly. Motherhood certainly took me through the same cruel pattern. After floundering sleeplessly, aimlessly, in a constant panicked state through the first few newborn months, I was led to believe I had mastery over this parenting thing. I could now interpret my newborn's cries, I could predict within a half-hour margin of error when she would go down for her nap, and I was becoming expertly rote and precise at changing a diaper.

Then the baby started teething. And *snap*, just like that, I was a novice again.

This is true in almost every arena of life: in science, in math, in the arts, in business, in the humanities, in sports. **The higher up you rise, the more you see what lays out of reach.**

It is simultaneously exciting and terrifying. That we can look back at the road we've traveled and see how much knowledge and experience we have amassed, reflect on how far we've come, how much we've changed, and look ahead only to find our movement has been minute—an insignificant blip.

For those of us involved in faith and theology conversations, and as a faith blogger myself, I am painfully and acutely aware of my vast ignorance. It is tempting for me, in order to sound authoritative, convincing, and—excuse the overused

term—prophetic, to exude certainty, to add power to my words. As an egalitarian, I am told to avoid qualifying my sentences to begin with, “I think.” No, I should assert and demand my voice is heard, equally and unequivocally as my male counterparts.

But surely, my strength comes not from claiming to stake my opinions on ideological grounds, but from holding my ideas loosely, tentatively put forth for examination and critique. Surely the sign of my words containing any value and credibility are ones meekly spoken, powered not by certainty but by teachability.

There is a Chinese proverb (天外有天) that translates, “Outside of a person there are other persons, outside of the sky is another sky.” It poetically teaches us there are always people better than you. Our astronomers are proving this ancient proverb with scientific data. There is literally another sky upon another upon another. The universe is more vast than we have ever imagined it to be, and it is forcing us to re-think everything we know—including, and especially our faith.

How do we hold our doctrinal convictions in earnest when we know there are skies beyond our sky? And when God, who we claim to be the Creator created so vastly outside of our scope of imagination?

I think (<== there it is again,) we can’t. We have to hold it all loosely. Our proposals for who God is and how God works in the world—our theological systems and institutional heritage—must be open to the sky beyond the sky. This is not to say we walk around muddled and befuddled in regards to what we believe. **But that it is only with increasing clarity of vision that we see how much remains unseen.**

Richard Rohr says it takes a lot of learning to finally “learn ignorance.” We must strive to learn ignorance if we are serious about maintaining our position as one who worships God instead of one who becomes God.

And how do we learn ignorance? Like my daughter, we have to keep moving up and falling down. Seventh grade to eighth grade. Senior in high school up and back down to freshman in college. Med school graduate up and back down to first-year resident.

To learn ignorance requires us to get gritty and keep ourselves in contact with those we can learn from, and not surround ourselves with people to teach at. It’s horribly humbling to be the one who isn’t in the know. It’s unsettling to constantly be in a place where we feel lost. And yet it is to push ourselves to continually learn into

ignorance, to rise into unknowing, to increase in order to decrease.

The mark of a remarkable faith leader is not one who walks into a room with charisma ready to wow the audience, but one who steps up on stage ready to learn from the audience. She is the one who is most like Christ, and I am ready to learn her ignorance.

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