

# Learning to See: The Role of Authoritative Guides in Knowing

Esther L. Meek

Abstract Key Words: knowing, authority, authoritative guides in knowing, the normative component of all knowing, persons and personhood, the personal, reciprocity, submission, epistemic responsibility.

*My own ongoing reflection on the Polanyian understanding of knowing leads me to recommend that we help people acknowledge and reaccredit authority as a key feature of all human knowing. This recommendation I support in this essay by showing the following. First, I argue that reliance on authority is unavoidable. The Polanyian model, along with the complementary insights of a few others, and reflection on human experience, together show that human knowledge is what it is only by virtue of its normative component. Such normativity, I argue, requires persons as mentors and as recipients. Second, I describe some of the ins and outs of responsible reliance on authority in a way that I hope will make it a more palatable and delightful prospect, and will encourage its skillful employment. I believe that this message offers much needed epistemological therapy for philosophy and ordinary people today.*

Thanks to the efforts of Descartes and other modern philosophers, the idea that authority might play a legitimate role in knowledge acquisition was excised from our Western mindset and replaced with its negation: that to the extent that a knowledge claim is derived by reliance on authority, it is thereby defective and illegitimate. Standard treatments of the sources of knowledge, when I was a student, ranked reason and sensation as paramount. Relying on the word of an authority made the list of secondary sources, as that which we tolerate when there isn't anything better, or when we're too young to think for ourselves. As soon as it can be replaced, it should be. Michael Polanyi notes this telling remark of Bertrand Russell's: "The triumphs of science are due to the substitution of observation and inference for authority. Every attempt to revive authority in intellectual matters is a retrograde step. ... One of the great benefits that science confers upon those who understand its spirit is that it enables them to live without the delusive support of subjective authority."<sup>1</sup>

Postmodernism's studied suspicion of all metanarratives both calls the bluff of modernism with respect to authority, and leaves the suspicious with no healthy response. The postmodern draws attention to what the modern failed to notice: the normative component of all knowing. All claims to knowledge reflect the fundamental religious (in the sense of unargued and uncontested) commitments of the knower or knowing community. Had this been openly acknowledged and responsibly navigated by the modern, suspicion may not have been the obvious response. As it is, the postmodern exercises as a matter of principle the very opposite of trust, and in this sense perpetuates the rejection of authority that characterized the modern. And if this paper's thesis is correct, that means that the postmodern, just like the modern, attempts to function epistemically in denial of the unavoidable role that normative commitments and authoritative guides play willy nilly in our knowing. I think the result is epistemic ill health. We live in a culture crying for epistemological therapy.

Among the many things about which Polanyi sounded a wake-up call in epistemology was this very issue. Scientific discovery occurs only in the context of an authoritative and communal tradition, and is accomplished only by people who have submitted themselves to apprenticeship with skilled masters who model an artistry larger than what they can articulate. In this respect, any effort of mine on this subject is like G.K.

Chesterton's wonderful metaphor of landing his wandering boat on a strange island, only to find that it is England.<sup>2</sup> However, if I may humbly add, he nevertheless proceeded to write his own book.

My ongoing reflection on the Polanyian understanding of knowing leads me to recommend that we help people acknowledge and reinstate authority as a key feature of all human knowing. This recommendation I support in this essay by showing the following. First, I argue that reliance on authority is unavoidable. The Polanyian model, along with the complementary insights of a few others, and reflection on human experience, together show that human knowledge is what it is only by virtue of its normative component. Such normativity, I argue, requires persons as mentors and as recipients. Second, I endeavor to describe some of the ins and outs of reliance on authority in a way that I hope will make it a more palatable and delightful prospect, and will encourage its skillful employment.

In engaging Polanyi's subject, however, I do not mean to imply that what I have developed here represents Polanyi's particular emphases concerning authority. He talked much and persuasively about authoritative traditions and communities. In this essay I develop different though complementary emphases and applications.

### *The Normative Component In All Knowing and the Necessity of Authoritative Guides*

By authoritative guides, I mean persons present or formerly present, whose words, normative as they are, bringing to verbal expression a life full of inarticulable skills and commitments as they do, guide my act of coming to know. Thus, my guide may be a mentor sharing space and time with me. My guide may be the caregiver who taught me to objectify and to engage the world as she taught me to speak. My guide may be a person whose words are captured in a book. My guide may be any number of maxims that come to us on the waves of oral tradition. My guide may be any articulated verbal standard that, may we not forget, originated with some person or community of persons, intended as an effective, yea, normative way to unlock the world.

### *Identifying the Normative Component*

Early in my thought development, I learned from theologian John Frame to identify not two but three dimensions of human knowledge—the existential, the situational, and the normative.<sup>3</sup> I didn't get it at first. Knowledge obviously involves the knower and the known, the existential and the situational. But the normative—what is that? It's taken a long time for the actuality of the normative to push through my dense modern philosophical haze. Not even a dissertation in Polanyi and multiple readings of Grene's *The Knower and the Known* waked me thoroughly to this until after years of incubation. Now I realize it was there all along. It was there, not only in Polanyi; it was also there in Plato. Thus, what I state here I hope you realized much sooner than I did. Yet it is a message I believe we will have to repeat often and patiently to person after person who could use some epistemological therapy.

When I teach people how Polanyi describes knowing, I often resort to the Magic Eye 3-D puzzles, in which the observer follows the directions and struggles to reconceive a computer-generated patterns as three-dimensional objects, such as dolphins. After years of further explaining "subsidiaries" by offering a random list of possible candidates, I tried applying the Framean triad to the list in the context of the Magic Eye example. The world, as I came to call the situational, included the surface features of the puzzle. The body, as I called the existential, included lived bodily efforts, such as those of the optical nerve. Having found the two, I went

looking for the third, the normative. But where? The directions! In a first encounter with a Magic Eye, a person sees the computer presentation, but has no clue concerning that nature of the game, let alone the object of it. The minimal fact that it is a game may also be in doubt, though its setting on the game page in the newspaper may be a clue. It is the directions that let the person know that a game is afoot, to bend the idiom, what the goal is and how to reach it. Were the puzzle designer present, or any other experienced person, that authoritative guide would demonstrate the behavior required, and then coach the initiate's own attempts, telling her what's happening and whether she is doing it right. But even at long-distance, the designer norms the initiate's experience formatively, interpreting for the initiate the goal, the process, and the initiate herself.

In addition, it is the case that actively shaping a pattern, which is the essence of the Polanyian description of knowing as integration, involves assigning varying values to the particulars with which the knower is first presented. Here I mean by *values* some measure of significance. I actually have in mind the paint-by-numbers that I occasionally did as a child. Suppose the paint-by-number blank had outlined segments that by themselves did not suggest a pattern. It would take actually putting green on the 9s, red on the 6s, blue on the 2s, to see that pattern. Painting the 9s green is like assigning value. Value assigning is, I am convinced, the driving mechanism of pattern making. No value assignment—no pattern, no integration. Assign values—and pattern, figure, steps out from the background. Even the simplest perception involves noticing, and noticing is inherently an assigning of values.

### *Linking the Normative to the Personal*

Polanyi made the case that this is personal: it involves a person's critical, responsible, appraisal, a tacit coefficient of all knowing thus inherently unformalizable. Marjorie Grene, if no one else, made the case that this is normative. "...[I]n *noticing* we have already a normative procedure, a bringing of aspects of experience under a system of values."<sup>4</sup> That's just one little piece of her brilliant argument that "there is no intelligible discourse independently of evaluation. Appraisal underlies all speech, and therefore all knowledge."<sup>5</sup> Contra the hard-to-kill fact/value dichotomy, there simply is no fact without value.<sup>6</sup> All concepts are standards, she says; "cat" signifies what-it-is-to-be-a-cat; and our humanity *is* the complex of criteria, of evaluative structures, within which we have come to dwell and are content to dwell.<sup>7</sup>

Humans mentor humans, moms guide infants in first noticings and namings, till the human child comes to indwell a world layered with values so richly and closely that we hardly notice them at all. A cat? Of course it's a cat! Seeing is believing—we say blandly, having forgotten that we had been taught to value in order to see what was there. —Which is the epistemological rationale for the fact that parents don't get the gratitude and respect they deserve. Says Grene: "A fundamental error of the fact/value dichotomy, it seems to me, was to see these three aspects of the human situation as two only, and so to miss the unique phenomenon which both unites the other two and holds them apart: the phenomenon of responsible acceptance of standards. ...As long as we seek wholly the stateable this constitutive element eludes us."<sup>8</sup> And as long as we seek wholly the stateable, we miss the role of authoritative, personal, guides in knowing.

Grene also cites ape and human child studies to root this normative ingredient in the natural artificiality, the fold in being, that makes us the humans we are. She follows the ape/human analysts in noting that human mother and child form a society in which the infant entrusts himself to the one who opens experience by norming it, acquiring it literally along with his mother's milk. No human experience is "given," but comes to us normed by a person who both models and speaks.

## *The Critical Role of Authoritative Guides in Knowing*

We need to learn to see. We need to be guided to see both ourselves and what is there. When I check these theses against my experience I come to see that authoritative guides are needed to interpret both the world and my very own self to me. It would not be correct to say that authority trumps rationalism and empiricism as a source of knowledge, as we shall see in the latter part of the essay. But it is the case that both rationalism and empiricism only succeed as they presume some skilled authoritative guiding.

Examples abound. Piano teachers and pitching coaches help their students identify a touch. Students in radiology are led by their teachers to read otherwise inscrutable patches of dark and light. John Frame sent me looking for the normative, even as Polanyi sent us all looking for the tacit coefficient. The people who reject Polanyi's work as subjectivism and mystery-mongering are the very ones who fail to see the tacit coefficient, seeing which involved a normed noticing that may have been more successfully expedited had they trusted themselves to a person as an authoritative guide. The cook teaches her student what scalded milk looks like, or dough through which yeast has successfully permeated. Authoritative guides teach us to notice what otherwise we would not even see. They teach us, through word and through example, the unformalizable skill of appraisal, the apt application of concepts to things.

Wise educators know this: learning takes place best in the hospitality of a relationship of persons in which trust and mutuality reign. In that safe space, the teacher speaks and moves intentionally with a view to replicating his words and tacit skills in the speaking and moving of the student. I cannot in this space begin to represent to you the rich insights of Parker Palmer along these lines.<sup>9</sup> Truth is personal; all truth is known in personal relationships. A teacher, not some theory, is the living link in the epistemological chain. In fact, truth is *troth*, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks. In his discussion, Palmer moves us way beyond the tighter claim that knowing requires the normative, to the multifaceted and allusive one that human knowing requires and thus is inculcated only through a plethora of unformalizable elements, best summed up as persons replicating persons.

Wise leaders know this also. Leadership, I feel sure, is very close to anything we might say about persons as authoritative guides in knowing. Consider then, Jere Moorman's application of Polanyian insights to business management. Moorman characterized the first mistake of objectivism as "an alienated, non-participating form of knowing." He describes Polanyi's personal knowledge, by contrast, as "a new paradigm of knowledge by participation where knowledge by relationship of the knower and the known is primary; where wholes are found to have properties that parts do not have; and where persons are alive: i.e. not reducible to their factual components—where persons and their passionate contributions to their knowledge are indispensable." Moorman says most pointedly: "no examination of the facts, however meticulously carried out, can make a person aware of the other's passionate message."<sup>10</sup> Adapting this to what we are saying about normativity in knowledge, and persons in normativity and therefore in knowledge: in the best, most successful connectings of knower and known, both knower and known and guide must be accessed in a way that integrates beyond the words and the "facts." The knower, in particular, to grasp and be changed by the words of the guide, must be picking up more than words; she must be picking up personal, passionate message.<sup>11</sup> This calls for the patient, self-giving, alongsidedness of guide and guided.

Philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin has claimed that persons coming to know themselves require other persons who listen actively to the telling of their story. Without the telling of the story, *there is no story*.<sup>12</sup> Story, I believe, is a normative shaping of our experience. It is an integrative pattern, a temporal one. An active listener, I believe, in this capacity serves as an authoritative guide. The knower, even to know himself, must be heard and coached in self-interpretation. The knower needs an authoritative guide to know himself. This is my personal experience repeatedly, as I listen to one after another of my students' stories. A student, having heard what I have to say, invites me into his or her life, to hear and to comment. It is also my experience as a knower: I rely on others to see myself and the significance of my acts and thoughts—or even just to see my acts and thoughts.

If our first modernist picture of knowledge was of two disembodied points, the knower, and the known, then affirmation of the normative dimension turned the two into three points, a triad. The fact that communication of this normativity requires persons and involves replication through mentoring leads me to embed my mental triad picture in a lived body, and to put another body alongside it, perhaps with its own somewhat larger triad. I have often said to my students: you will not remember the words that I say; what you will remember is the person, the window on the world, that is me, and what you will find replicated is not me, but a better, richer, you. If knowledge is personal and participative, historically situated, tapping into dimensions of reality beyond what is expressible verbally but is instead skillfully and personally accessed, unlocked by means of norms, there couldn't be a better way to pass on knowledge than by means of embodied persons alongside embodied persons.

In short: the normative dimension of knowing just is that which makes it knowing. Normativity requires or presupposes personhood, persons in pledge relationship. So knowing requires persons functioning as authoritative guides.<sup>13</sup>

Descartes needed to realize that, had he truly jettisoned all that was his as a result of authority, he might as well have *been* the piece of wax. He could not have spoken, let alone have persuaded an entire philosophical era. He could not have eaten (farmers require authoritative guides too) nor performed any other of his routine cultural activities. He could not have thought his way through to thinking himself a thinking thing.

Youth pastors with whom I work agree that students' deepest question is, whom can I trust? My daughter, a college student, confirms this in her report of a late-night IM conversation with a suicidal classmate: "I refuse to trust anyone," he wrote. This is both a cry of pain, and also a statement of the hopeless future of epistemic skepticism. If every decision, including my choice of whom to trust, is open for deconstruction, how is it possible to avoid such inauthenticity?

Moderns and postmoderns need to hear that it is not possible to disengage from all authoritative guides, nor, despite the pain and error to which they sometimes expose us, would we want to. Since we cannot and do not wish to disengage from norms and authorities in knowing, it would behoove us to explore how best to employ them. We cannot ever step outside what we might call the matrix of authority. We must learn instead how to navigate it. I believe all of us already practice this navigation in the ordinary affairs of daily life. Holding out against this risky navigation in knowing is not an option.

All of us may also need the gentle admonition that our epistemic questions may be a smokescreen that hides our irresponsibility and laziness even from ourselves. This is no argument, or course, but a tentative and

selective diagnosis. Deconstruction cuts both ways. But heartfelt questions can be helped also by thinking further about how in fact we do navigate the matrix of authority. .

All of this leads me to consider how to make a winsome case for authoritative guides, and guide people in utilizing them responsibly. To this end we have already reasoned, in the first half of this essay, that just about all that we are and know is ours at the agency of authoritative guides in our past and of our responsible submission to them. In this essay's second half, I elucidate various aspects of our use of authoritative guides in knowing. This kind of exploration, I believe, also serves to recommend its viability and promote a reinstatement of authority as a source of knowledge. Can we more adequately describe the dimensions of knowing by authority, so as to appreciate and employ them more responsibly? What, for example, makes for a trustworthy authority? How does the authority relate to the knower and the known? How do I choose between alternative authorities? Does not the need for such personal choice render me the epistemically ultimate authority? How do we cope with the reality of the hermeneutic spiral, the fact that my interaction with both the authority and with the known is really with both as I interpret them in my understanding? These are some of the questions I have kept in mind as I endeavor to describe, in what follows, how we navigate the matrix of authority in our coming to know.

### *How We (Properly and Improperly) Navigate the Matrix of Authority*

Once again I mean to see how the Framean triad can help us think through this matter. In any act of knowing, we have knower, known, and a normative dimension with at least a historic connection to a personal guide. As I was working out my thoughts, I drew my triangle, with two arrows pointing in opposite directions between each point. After labeling the points, I strove to describe each arrow. The reason I drew the arrows was that I wanted to suggest a dynamic system as opposed to a static structure. Each participant moves toward the other, and responds to the other's initiative. This represents participative and interpersonal knowing.

Thinking in terms of this picture, I think the following comments shed light on how we utilize guides in coming to know. For me, this is a work in progress rather than a completely articulated system. Convivial contributions are welcome.

#### *Participatants Are Personal*

First, both the knower and the guide are human persons. This we see must be on the basis of the argument about normativity in the first half of this essay. If knowing is a norming that draws up into its pattern a vast range of inarticulable commitments and skills, the best and perhaps only way fundamentally to begin to know is to apprentice oneself to another human knower. In addition, knower and guide, at least, are embodied, as well as personal. The known may also be a person. It may, if not a person, still be arguably person-like. It is what I call a characterized real. It reveals itself in indeterminate, inexhaustible but nevertheless systematic, recognizable and nameable ways. Its character can be unlocked by me, especially as I gain skill through expert guidance. And, I believe, it reveals itself in response to my respectful self-binding, expressed in patience, attentiveness, humility, and commitment to its reality. I join Palmer in believing it helpful to think of truth as truth, that knowers relating knowingly to the known do so most effectively as that relationship is pledgedlike.<sup>14</sup>

Persons, it is sobering and awe-inspiring to note, are most fundamentally *not* substances with

attributes, contra the Greeks, but living beings who transcend the particularities of self in communion with others.<sup>15</sup> Our very identity as persons links us in relationship to other persons. I mention this topic only to promise to explore in another setting. But if this is so, it could hardly be otherwise that human knowing occurs in the context of personal relationship.

### *How We Gauge Potential Guides*

Second, a credible guide is one who demonstrates responsiveness to and mutuality with both the knower and the known. If the authority is well-related to the known, then she is an expert, say, on rose bushes, because she is skillfully acquainted with the character of that known. She has listened to, not dictated, the known. She has let the character of the known shape her judgment, rather than solely making it submit to hers.

Similarly, a trustworthy authority, ideally, is one in relationship with the knower, as mentor to initiate, qualified to apprentice him, but attentive to and increasingly aware of the apprentice, the nature of his need, the strength of his commitment. A competent mentor knows to cultivate the hospitable space in which learning can occur. Even as a rose bush expert cultivates a bush (the known), an authoritative guide to the rose bush student cultivates a caring environment for the student (the knower).

The relationship is mutually shaping. No teacher remains unshaped by her students; each grows in response to the other. This means that our triad is a developing one. It never remains static. Each dimension changes during and as a result of the interaction. But such dynamism is not the sign of weakness, but the sign of the strength of something that is alive.

A knower can sense and grow in her ability to sense an authority candidate's connectedness both to known and to knower. In other words, we build our authority-sensing skill. We sense in-touchness, and care, and expertise. I hope you see that I am only describing the way we all navigate ordinary life.

When I lived in Louisiana, I quickly gained regard for my "parish agent," an old Cajun man who would come when I called with a yard problem and use the occasion to teach me about everything else in my yard as well. He knew about everything from chinch bugs to pruning. I quickly sensed his expertise, his love of things growing, and his propensity to teach.

Similarly, in academia, as we are trained, we get better at telling good sources from bad ones. We can be guided in choosing guides. I am told that a noted professor at Rice University advised the class of incoming freshmen that the goal of their education was to develop a built-in, anti-magnetic, waterproof, shock resistant, crap detector. Even as knowing is a skill that increases with practice, so recognizing wise guides is a skill that increases with practice.

The point is that we do choose guides, and this is how we choose them. What draws us to them is their grip on reality, their vision (i.e., their grip on reality yet to be known), and their care for us. Yesterday a strange man chose me as an authoritative guide. Driving out of my subdivision on the way to work, I encountered an oncoming car whose driver waved me to stop. He wanted directions to a road in the subdivision. He gauged rightly that I knew the subdivision and would condescend to tell him.

## *Distinguishing Authority from Authoritarianism*

We can in light of this distinguish *authority* from *authoritarianism*. We rightly resent and discredit pretenders who demonstrate little connectedness to the known in question or to the knower in question. Of course there will come times when we misjudge this in our inexperience. We must ask: is he arrogant or am I ignorant? But generally a reliable authority also gives us grounds for trust, an expertise with regard to the known and a care with regard to the knower that shows respect and attentiveness and skill, an in-tune-ness rather than a high-handedness, or a self-aggrandizement. Authoritarianism thwarts the cultivation of the personal relationship in which learning flourishes.

Authoritarianism, when it is practiced by a guide or by the guided, treats the knower as passive, as if the knower is not actively involved in the process. “Do this because I said it!” It is arguable that over the centuries we have come to view authority as authoritarianism and hence a repression of knowledge precisely because we were overlooking the active role of the personal in knowing, the very ingredient which Polanyi has persuasively argued is indispensable. Authoritarianism discredits the responsible agency of the knower. It leads to the false dichotomy I seek in this paper to criticize, the belief that we choose between authority/mindlessness and no authority/knowledge. It also breeds epistemic irresponsibility. Some knowers prefer authoritarian guides, so that they can avoid owning their choices, so that they can pass the buck, take the path of least resistance.<sup>16</sup>

## *The Epistemic Contribution of Active Submission*

One of the most intriguing things about authoritative guides is that the knower must submit to guidance not only with respect to the known but also with respect to himself as knower. The guide, somewhat like a global positioning system, tells you not only where you are going, but where you are and how to get there and whether you are going about it right. It’s quite possible that the knower begins with having it wrong, wrong even about herself. It takes humility and grace to let somebody else tell you what you are doing wrong. Wise indeed are those who recognize the wisdom of this course of action.

In fact, I think it a telling critique of the typical Western misunderstanding of knowledge (and personhood) that we all know what it is to say, “He knows me better than I know myself.” But this state of affairs is indicated by the Polanyian model. The knower is the “from,” by definition more (or differently) attentive to the “to,” the focus, than to himself and the clues on which he relies. In an act of coming to know, the “to” is in a profound sense prior. We can get it right without knowing all that went into our doing it. Coaches and friends are mirrors in which, rightly, we see ourselves reflected, thereby glimpsing things to which we were blind. A guide can and must tell me when I am mistaken, or help me see what I am or think, if I am to move forward in my knowing. Submission, openness to another as a norm to which I strive to conform myself, from whose hand I receive correction, is necessary for me to grow in knowing.

## *Epistemic Stewardship*

This leads us to consider the role of the knower. Does all this mean that submission is a laudable thing? Isn’t submission just turning belly up, a mere passivity bordering on nonbeing? Is this not what acknowledgment of an authority entails? Does not, rather, my own active involvement in the epistemic process mean that

I and I alone am the epistemic ultimate, the determinative cause in my own knowing? And isn't this to be preferred? I would like to suggest that the knower's active involvement in the process is indeed a *sine qua non*, but that does not rule out the possibility or necessity of authoritative guides. For what the knower is contributing should not be construed as an autonomous last court of appeal. Instead it is a responsible engagement, sensing, and stewardship. Submission, we may see, is as much the act of a responsible agent as is authoritative guiding. It can even, temporally speaking, initiate the process. It is a reciprocal act, a counterpart, Ginger Rogers to Fred Astaire, dancing backwards being equally as active and responsible as dancing forwards, if not more so. Teachers have only to recall the students who have said to them, "I need to take your course," or "I need to hear what you are saying to me," plus the students whose responsible initiative both affirmed their trust and catalyzed their learning. Teachers know they just can't do it without such responsible agency on the part of the student.

In the biblical story of the early Christian church, the apostle Paul arrived at Berea and announced the good news of Jesus' messiahship and resurrection to the Jews there. The Scripture says "the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians [who had rioted], for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (Acts 17:11, NIV) This response to a hitherto unknown message and guide is full of responsible agency, respectfulness without mindless acceptance. It would be inappropriate to say that the Bereans set themselves up as epistemically ultimate authorities (that may be, by contrast, what the Thessalonians had done). The better word to describe it seems to me to be *stewardship*: the personally responsible utilization, care and development of another's resources entrusted to one's care. The Bereans stewarded their epistemic resources, utilizing the key authorities available to them, comparing one to the other, examining their own heart response, with their prevailing commitment seeming to be to truth. If they had vaunted their own epistemic agency, they would have blocked their contact with the real.

Of course, the sobering reality is that the process involves risk. As Lesslie Newbigin says more than once, "There are no insurance policies."<sup>17</sup> We make mistakes. We can choose poor guides. We can choose our guides wisely and still be disappointed. We can end up, not with knowledge, but with delusion or grave error. We always have to choose selectively, choosing to trust one guide in one respect, and another in another respect, for no single person is, can be or should be seen to be complete. But this state of affairs does not make guide-trusting or knowledge undoable or unnecessary. Indeed, the fact that we can sometimes tell that we have been misled shows that the thing is doable. Trusting no one at all is not an option; the alternative is trusting someone else, a decision that also involves risk and possible failure. Instead, it serves to highlight even more powerfully the agency of the knower who, in her submission, exercises critical personal and risky responsibility. It also is a reminder that guide choosing is a skill that we can be worse or better at, and with respect to which we would do well to cultivate wisdom.<sup>18</sup> And it is a warning to those who aspire to be guides, teachers, and parents, to cultivate their own character and expertise with sober care.

### *Internalizing Authoritative Guidance*

As the process unfolds with respect to a specific act of coming to know, any one of the three components may instigate it—knower, known, or guide. It may be the knower's own sense of need—I always think of Han Solo's "I got a bad feeling about this. . ." It may be the eventful stirrings of time and space—we find ourselves plunged into circumstances that impel our learning. It may be the words of an authority spoken into what is at the time a void of response—as when a student stumbles into the first day of calculus class. Along the trajectory of our coming to know, we continually move back and forth between the three, checking the one

against the other, modifying the one in light of the other.

There will be a point at the beginning of our coming to know that the words of these guides hit us as external and arbitrary, because we have yet to have their experience or even to know what to look for or to feel. This occurs especially when the instigating factor is not my sense of personal need but my hearing the normative word of a possible authoritative guide. Once we have trusted the guide and gained the particular skill of unlocking the world that is in question, the words of the guide no longer feel external and arbitrary, for we have come to embody them, to know them as lived, to bring them to expression in our own lives. Were we asked to describe it to someone else, we probably would use the same words. One young man said to me, for example, “My daddy always used to say, you can stand on your head for a year....” He told me that to express his own approach of being willing to try anything for a time, even if it is difficult. He had embodied his father’s words, but he produced them to explain his own lived experience.

### *How We Navigate in Light of Multiple Authorities*

In coming to know, the knower navigates among an array of authorities, like a sailor orienting by the stars. I could not even begin to specify all the authorities by which we orient, but with respect to a certain epistemic endeavor, usually there are a few key ones. It seems that sometimes we rank these hierarchically, using “lower” ones where the “higher” one does not speak. It also seems to me that we use them complementarily, perhaps even utilizing a “lower” one to deepen our insight with respect to the word of a “higher” one. This latter describes how I relate Polanyi and many other subjects! Some day I want a bumper sticker that expresses my stock phrase: “Polanyi helps.” Many subjects are deepened and amplified by bringing Polanyian insights to bear. I am about to address a group of artists thinking about creativity. I am going to teach them Polanyi—not because Polanyi’s authority trumps their own or their teachers’—but because it collaborates actually to elucidate more fully the word of other authoritative guides. In this essay you can already name the guides by whose lights I have navigated. I think you can also see that I have utilized them collaboratively.

In this tacit ranking of authorities, I think that a knower in many epistemic circumstances evidences a heart commitment, the choice of one norm and/or one guide as norming and guiding all the rest. We have all been heard to express something like this when we say, “I trust so-and-so implicitly.” By that we mean, whatever so-and-so does we take to be right, true, and faithful. Even if evidence were against this commitment, we would resolve to remain committed, for this norm, this person, is our standard of choice by which we judge all others. This affirmation is neither baldly arbitrary nor a passive shirking of personal epistemic responsibility. To acknowledge a fundamental commitment neither makes us epistemic arbiters nor does it deal us out of the equation. It shapes our rationality, and we responsibly and riskily embrace it for that purpose, rather than our rationality shaping it. This heart commitment is covenantal, pledgeliike, a resolved affirmation of the kind we most commonly experience as person pledged to person in a covenant of love, a marriage. It is appropriate to describe it as broadly religious, an act of worship. I do think that many people navigate with a sense that the heart commitment they have is less than satisfactory.<sup>19</sup>

While there is appropriately an air of permanence about this pledge, the fact is that people do shift their loyalties, and all of us, epistemically, must have a first time of coming to embrace them or recognizing that we embrace them. Were a chosen guide to prove untrustworthy, breaking through our most determined disposition to believe him or her faithful, true, right and good, we would rightly need to seek another. Such a move is radical, a personal transformation that can affect us to the core, a conversion. I do not think that people

ever navigate without such a heart commitment.

### *Polanyian Response to Hermeneutic Concerns*

We must at all times factor in our interpretive contribution. Even in acknowledging the legitimate and necessary role of authoritative guides, at no point may we affirm that any knowledge or guide is accessible apart from our interpretation of it. The knower norms, even as the guide norms, and it is her glory to learn to norm well. Our interpretive skill (or lack of it) is just one of the things that we may need a guide to attend to and help us to cultivate. Again, we need to see that our interpretive grid should not be taken to be epistemically ultimate. It is possible and necessary to submit it to the test of both guide and world (something understandable only when as Polanyians we acknowledge our tacit powers) in order to move forward. This is responsible stewardship. “Our knowledge rests on the responsible and skilled judgment of persons,” says Moorman.<sup>20</sup>

Left to itself, this hermeneutic qualification would render the act of knowing arbitrary. It is, however, counterbalanced by the artful functioning of the tacit dimension in knowing. Even as “truth lies in its indeterminate bearing on reality,” and our tacit powers are aptly suited to the skilled appraisal of that bearing, so our tacit powers, our embodied, situated awareness, adds the third dimension, a kind of background check, to strengthen our more explicit hermeneutic efforts. The knower senses even as she trusts. The radar should never be turned off—and by *radar* I don’t mean a kind of ruthless criticism that opposes all trust, but our ever-functioning, skilled, stewardly, sensing. Gendlin labors to develop the notion of *felt sense*, or *body sense*.<sup>21</sup> That sensing is what we continually exercise, for example, as we continually measure the aptness of our words. My mother has Alzheimers. Ever the word*meister*, she is still sensing when she hasn’t quite got the right word, and searching for it; usually after a while she gets it. An exhaustively explicit ideal for knowledge blinds us, as Polanyi has taught us, to these powerful and indispensable tacit capacities. The point here is that they buoy up trusting authoritative guides even as they float all articulate knowledge.

The important thing to see is that in navigating the matrix of authority in the pursuit of knowing we have no absolute anchor, if by that we mean an unqualified, uninterpreted, undeveloping starting point from which we may derive a flow chart of foolproof operations. The other important thing to see is that far from negating it, this dynamic system is the medium and beachhead in and from which we learn to engage the world. Instead of standing on the sand, we learn to surf the waves. Water lets you sink when you are standing still, but it holds you up when you’re moving. We learn to ride it.

My hope is that exploring this marvelous and skillful interweaving that we recognize characterizes our knowing will serve to allay the fears and objections of those who have been deluded into thinking that authority is bad, or that it is avoidable. Okay, so maybe we don’t use the word, “authority.” Maybe we just live our lives with caring, confidence, and joy, closely alongside those with whom we might, after a time, have an opening.

Authoritative guides are a critical piece of this unfolding that is knowing, even as normativity is a critical dimension of knowledge. Donald Guthrie, an educator, and my former boss, has described young postmoderns as “information rich and mentor poor.” They are also, I find, far more open to having older people in their lives than my generation was. The obvious practical injunction for us in the vintage years of our lives is to offer ourselves, our persons, to be alongside young people, which is why I’m chaperoning the high school band to the Orange Bowl in a month.<sup>22</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *The Impact of Science on Society* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952) pp. 110-11, quoted in “The Potential Theory of Adsorption,” in Marjorie Grene, ed., *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi* (Chicago, 1969), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Chesterton was picturing his own perception that he had made some profound personal ideational discoveries, only to find out that what he had come up with had been for centuries known as Christianity. *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* (Doubleday, Image Books: 1959), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987). Frame developed this triad as a result of exploring the implications of God’s lordship and the role of Scripture for human knowing. God’s sovereignty comes to expression in his control (the situational), his authority (the normative) and his presence (the existential). I have found the triadic approach valuable in unpacking all human knowing. It helped me unfold Polanyi’s insights much as that funny wooden rack of my grandmother’s helped her untangle and rewind her skeins of yarn. And even as this triad elucidates all human knowing, revealing the role of normativity in ordinary knowing and thus of authoritative personal guides, it also serves to demystify and accredit historic Christianity’s intentional reliance on authoritative verbal witness embedded in personal, covenantal relationships as a standard epistemological enterprise. Another especially helpful source regarding the relative roles of the authority of Scripture and the church has been Herman Ridderbos’ *Redemptive History and The New Testament Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> *The Knower and the Known* (London: University of California Press, Ltd. 1966), p. 175.

<sup>5</sup> *The Knower and the Known*, p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> Frame concurs with Grene that knowing is rooted in value, arguing that epistemology is a subset of ethics.

<sup>7</sup> *The Knower and the Known*, pp. 164, 168, 159.

<sup>8</sup> *The Knower and the Known*, p. 181.

<sup>9</sup> *To Know As We Are Known* (Harper San Francisco, 1983). See for the following quotes pp. 48, 29, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Jere Moorman, “The New Art of Leadership and Polanyi’s Theory of Tacit Knowing,” paper delivered at the Loyola Polanyi Conference, June, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> This, by the way, I believe to be the key to effective writing. One cannot expect one’s classroom lectures to transcribe without addition into text. A writer must both say what she has to say and communicate her passion for it. All the body-based inarticulable things, including passions, commitments, and skill modeling, that communicate as person is alongside person, must in written message be communicated, if not in words, then by means of words (and sometimes exclamation points, Marty!).

<sup>12</sup> Eugene Gendlin, Talk delivered at the Polanyi Conference, June 2001.

<sup>13</sup> We may also conjecture the following intriguing claims also indicated by this discussion, but beyond its scope. First, normativity and its required persons-in-pledge-relationship context suggests, in a theological vein, a Sixth Way, an argument from human knowing to the requisite anterior existence of a Person as first cause. Second, the normative dimension of knowing requires the verbal. This makes me wonder if in the Genesis account of creation, worlds could have come into existence by means of anything other than the spoken “let there be...’s” of God.

<sup>14</sup> Esther Lightcap Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), Ch. 22. I hope to explore this more in my next project; I will argue that

we adopt an interpersonal, pledge-based relationship as the paradigm for all knowing. I call this “covenant epistemology.”

15 J. D. Zizioulas, “Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* (28), pp. 401-48. See further John MacMurray, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961) and Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

16 This insight I owe to Mike Williams. Williams also notes that evangelical Christians often seem to have embraced authoritarianism in their approach to God and Scripture. “God said, I believe it, that settles it” is a commonly heard maxim, which is at best naively true, for it hides from the speaker his or her own personal responsible agency in knowing and trusting God. By contrast, Williams argues that the God who commands me to trust him gives innumerable occasions for me to experience his trustworthiness, even as a wise parent both requires a child’s obedience and offers ample proof of loving commitment and faithfulness.

The evangelical’s commitment to authoritarianism is well-intentioned, I believe, though misguided: it stems from an effort to express God’s lordship over all. But American evangelicalism has imbibed the very Western model of knowledge criticized by Polanyi, and has yet, as a whole, to recognize Polanyi’s *tertium quid* or see that it accords more faithfully and evocatively with Scripture than has the modernist one. Frame has sought to develop an epistemological approach that harmonizes with Scripture and elucidates the parameters indicated by God’s lordship, espousing authority and not authoritarianism (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*). But in the absence of a broader epistemological sea change of the sort possible in a Polanyian approach, this effort has been met with harsh criticism and lack of understanding.

17 See his *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 14, for example.

18 The biblical book of Proverbs is replete with maxims concerning choosing guides.

19 My claim is that this heart commitment is not unique to the believer, nor avoidable or non-epistemic for anyone else. This has been argued also by Nicholas Wolterstorff, in *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), Roy Clouser, *Knowing With the Heart: Religious Experience and Belief in God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999); and John Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, esp. pp. 125-27. Christians’ trusting God’s self-disclosure in Scripture fits the parameters of all acts of knowing.

20 “The New Art of Leadership and Polanyi’s Theory of Tacit Knowing.”

21 *Focusing* (Bantam, 1979).

22 Special thanks are due to Mike Williams and Dale Cannon, whose comments on an earlier draft served strategically to guide the development of my thought in this essay. In this 2005 revision of the essay, I have adjusted several dated references. But I have left this Orange Bowl closer (December 2002) stand.