

Waiting for Wisdom Denise Cumbee Long

Job 28:9-13,23-28
I Kings 3:5-12

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I Corinthians 13:8-12

The internet has opened up a whole new world for the bored or lonely who are looking for conversation partners. *Jabberwacky* is an artificial intelligence - a chat robot, often known as a 'chatbot' or 'chatterbot'. Its purpose is to simulate natural human chat in an interesting and entertaining manner. The artificial intelligence of *Jabberwacky* stores everything anyone has ever said to it and finds the most appropriate thing to say using contextual pattern matching techniques. In speaking to a conversation partner, it uses learnt material, and supposedly borrows a little bit of that person's intelligence as it learns more. It can be taught slang English, word games, jokes and any other form of identifiable language trait. The *Jabberwacky* website boasts that "Everyone contributes, so everyone can enjoy chatting - you could say it's a conversational wikipedia." (<http://international01.jabberwacky.com/j2about>)

There is something unsettling about the idea of an artificial intelligence taking into itself bits and pieces of human intelligence and "learning" how to respond in a way that mimics human conversation. There are plenty of jokes on the internet about the computer that adapts its response to the IQ level of the person interacting with it, varying the topics of conversation from NASCAR racing and soap operas to new theories in nuclear physics! The idea of "artificial" intelligence is an intriguing one. What does it do to our traditional notion of human intelligence? And what is the difference between wisdom and knowledge? What is it that makes one truly wise?

As spiritual beings, we wonder about the nature of wisdom. It has an elusive quality, always seeming to be out of our reach. The author of Job uses poetic imagery to describe how humankind's technological prowess, the ability to mine the secret depths of the earth, will not bring us any closer to discovering true wisdom:

Miners dig the hardest rocks, dig mountains away at their base... They dig to the sources of rivers and bring to light what is hidden. But where can wisdom be found? Where can we learn to understand? Wisdom is not to be found among mortals; no one knows its true value. (Job 28: 9-13)

Wisdom is qualitatively different than knowledge. It is an attribute that does not originate from human beings, but rather is part of God's nature. *God alone knows the way, knows the place where wisdom is found*, says the speaker in Job. True wisdom is a divine quality that is only dimly reflected by humans who have reverence for God and turn away from wrongdoing.

Scriptures not only speak about the elusive aspect of wisdom, but also about its incomplete nature. As finite human beings, we are incapable of seeing the big picture. We may be able to see some of the various threads in the mysterious tapestry of life, but we simply don't have the perspective to take in the design of the fabric as a whole. Our religious hope is in the promise of a more complete vision- one that will happen somehow, someday, when all distance between God and humanity is finally dissolved. As Paul said, "For our gifts of knowledge and of inspired messages are only partial; but when what is perfect comes, then what is partial will disappear... What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete- as complete as God's knowledge of me. (I Corinthians 13: 9-10, 12).

Eliezer Shore, a rabbi and teacher, writes that Jewish tradition describes God as the "knower, the known, and the act of knowing." There is nothing outside of God, so God's knowledge is Self-Knowledge. Our knowledge is different. It is not intrinsic to us, but is both received from without and uncovered from within ourselves. We are beings known by God. (*Eliezer Shore, "At the Center", Parabola, Vol. XXII, No. 1, Feb. 1997*).

The connection between knowing oneself and knowing God is perhaps most strikingly visible, at least in Christian texts, in the early Gnostic writings. In 1945, an Arab peasant made an astonishing discovery in Nag

Hammadi, Egypt of papyrus books some 1,500 years old which were translations of even more ancient texts, some possibly written earlier than the gospels of the New Testament. These texts were very different in style and content than most of the canonical books of the Christian Bible.

History reveals that the Nag Hammadi texts circulated during the early years of the Christian era and were denounced as heresy by orthodox Christians in the middle of the second century. Possession of heretical books was a criminal offense and copies were burned or destroyed. However, someone in Upper Egypt took copies of the banned books and hid them from destruction in a buried jar where they remained for almost 1,600 years.

As Elaine Pagels points out in her book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, those who wrote and circulated these texts didn't regard themselves as "heretics". Pagels writes:

*Most of the writings use Christian terminology, unmistakably related to a Jewish heritage. Many claim to offer traditions about Jesus that are secret....These Christians are now called Gnostics, from the Greek word gnosis, usually translated as "knowledge." For as those who claim to know nothing about ultimate reality are agnostic (literally, "not knowing"), the person who does claim to know such things is called gnostic ("knowing"). (Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Random House: New York, 1979, p. xix.)*

Pagels goes on to say that *gnosis* is not primarily rational knowledge. It could better be translated as "insight", the intuitive process of knowing oneself. The early Christian Gnostics claimed that to truly know oneself is to know human nature and, at the deepest level, to know God. Pagels quotes a Gnostic teacher Monoimus who wrote:

Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own.... Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate.... If you carefully investigate these matters you will find [God] in yourself. (Ibid)

I think these Gnostic texts are a fascinating glimpse of the diversity of religious thought prevalent in the early Christian era. Of course, what we now consider orthodox belief comes from the writings and teachings of the "winners" of the theological controversies of those early years. The Nag Hammadi writings remind me of the imperfect nature of all human religion. God is much bigger than the boxes we create, and spiritual wisdom can often be found in paradox. Sometimes, religious statements that seem to express opposite views can each be true.

Orthodox Christianity emphasized the chasm separating humanity from God, God as wholly Other, while the Gnostics stressed that self-knowledge is also knowledge of God, that the divine and the self are intimately tied up together. Perhaps we ought to sit with these thoughts for awhile, not trying too quickly to resolve the tension or dismiss one view as false. Perhaps sitting and waiting is one way to be spiritually wise.

Over the past few days, I have been thinking about the nature of wisdom and trying to identify some markers that would help me measure how well I might be doing in my own search for spiritual enlightenment. Sometimes, it feels like I am the gasping pilgrim in the comic strips who struggles up the mountain to ask the wise hermit at the top about the meaning of life. I wish there were some cut and dried answers, some dispensation of divine secrets that one could discover by virtue of hard work and perseverance. But most often, as in the comic strips, there is no answer from the guru at the top of the mountain, or the teacher turns out to be no wiser than the one who has crawled up and lies gasping at his feet.

However, the markers which have withstood the test of my own spiritual experience and which I also think reflect the wisdom of other Christian elders and teachers might be summed up as three "w's": wonder, works, and waiting.

When we were children, we lived by wonder. As we entered the world and came to see the beauty of nature, the glories of existence, we naturally marveled about the wonder of it all. We had an insatiable desire not only to know how something is, but the very *why* of it. Richard Lewis, in his essay, "Living by Wonder", describes

how wonder was “our foundation from which we offered ourselves the daily surprise of discovering another question, another way to uncover something mysterious, something we hadn’t understood yesterday.” (Lewis, “Living by Wonder”, *Parabola*, Vol. XXII, No. 1, Feb. 1997).

But our childhood life of wonder is too often short-lived. As we get older we encounter other forms of learning imposed by society which emphasize logic and the rightness or wrongness of what we think or understand. One of the best things we can do is to re-capture the wonder that reminds us of magnificence and mystery. In the words of archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes, we need to remember that “we still inhabit a mystery and that the best of scientific wisdom recognizes this is so. Let us have the courage to accept the inner experience that tells us that we are something more- and that we may be part of a process that is something much greater still.” (Ibid.)

Another marker for me on the highway toward wisdom is the importance of works: right action as opposed to right belief. I am convinced that God does not care much for our carefully constructed dogmas and belief systems. In fact, these are human constructions that have often been used throughout history to distort religion and sanction violence against those of differing races, cultures or faith traditions. Scripture is quite clear that wisdom is not found in following prescribed religious rules or believing in specific doctrines. In the book of Isaiah we read these words:

The Lord said, “These people claim to worship me, but their words are meaningless, and their hearts are somewhere else. Their religion is nothing but human rules and traditions, which they have simply memorized. So I will startle them with one unexpected blow after another. Those who are wise will turn out to be fools, and all their cleverness will be useless. (Isaiah 29:13-14).

The Biblical figure held up as the supreme example of wisdom, King Solomon, is deemed to be wise because of his desire to help others. He prays:

O Lord God, you have let me succeed my father as king, even though I am very young and don’t know how to rule. Here I am among the people you have chosen to be your own, a people who are so many that they cannot be counted. So give me the wisdom I need to rule your people with justice and to know the difference between good and evil. Otherwise, how would I ever be able to rule this great people of yours?

God is pleased that Solomon seeks wisdom to act justly and compassionately, and not simply for his own pious edification. This is what makes Solomon truly wise: the desire to know the difference between good and evil in order to bring justice and peace to the people he both ruled and served.

Richard Holloway, former Bishop of the Scottish Episcopal Church, has written that Christianity would do well to switch its emphasis “from belief to practice, from Orthodoxy to Orthopraxis, from believing things *about* Jesus to the imitation *of* Jesus.”

(Holloway, *Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2001, p. 156.)

Faith is not identical to accepting certain intellectual propositions about God. And being right is not the same as being wise. A poem by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai reminds us of this truth:

*From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the Spring.*

*The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.*

*But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plough.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.
(Ibid, vi)*

Doubts and loves... this is where the waiting comes in. We wonder, we work to make the world a better place, and we try to rid ourselves of the rigidity that insists on its own way. And then, we wait for God, sometimes without resort to any words at all.

We must remember that *all* our words and notions about the divine are inadequate. As Karen Armstrong points out in her autobiography *The Spiral Staircase*, any statement about God should have two characteristics. "It must be paradoxical, to remind us that God cannot be contained in a neat, coherent system of thought; and it must be apophatic.... It should lead us to a moment of silent awe or wonder, because when we are speaking of the reality of God we are at the end of what words or thoughts can usefully do." (Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase*, Anchor Books, New York, 2005, p. 292).

Armstrong, like Holloway, finds wisdom in the soft ground of doubts and loves. Faith is not accepting statements about God, but rather cultivating an intuition, the deep knowledge that "life has some ultimate meaning and value, despite the tragic evidence to the contrary." (Ibid).

Wisdom is the wonder, the working, and the waiting where we fan the flame of that inner voice that assures us that ultimately all will be well. Madeleine L'Engle tells the story of putting her grandchildren to bed, not long after her own mother's death. She writes:

We go into the bathroom to brush teeth and wash faces, and suddenly Lena looks at me and asks, "Grandmadeleine, is it all right?"

Slightly taken aback... I answer, "Yes, Lena, it's all right."

"But Gran, is everything really all right? really?" It is completely cosmic questioning, coming from a small girl in a white nightgown with a toothbrush in her hand, sensing the unfamiliar surrounding the familiar. It is warm and light in the house, but the greater the radius of light, the wider the perimeter of darkness.

.... "Yes, Lena, it is all right."

*(Madeleine L'Engle, **Walking on Water**, North Point Press: New York, 1997, p.176.)*

Julian of Norwich said it this way. "All will be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Faith is trusting this deep knowledge, leaning on the invisible arms of a Love that will not let us go.

We are all waiting for wisdom. In the meantime, may we remember that we inhabit a mystery and that we live by work and wonder.

Amen.