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Believing and Knowing

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Believing and Knowing

Believing is not the same as knowing. Believing depends in part upon what we know, but some of what we know depends upon believing. We can look at a red car and know its color without exercising belief. If we are concerned about our safety in driving the car on a freeway, we might believe someone who tells us that the car is safe to use, or we might read reports and records to gain information. If we wait for absolute certainty, we will never move, but if we entrust our lives to a vehicle with no knowledge about its condition, our belief is inappropriate. Believing and knowing are complementary. We exercise both in our process for making everyday decisions.

Without believing, we learn very little. Believing leads to knowledge. At some point in a relationship, if we begin to trust another's respect for us, we will invest time and energy in getting to know that person. When one of us knows a little about global warming and believes that the subject is worthy of our attention, we will seek more knowledge about it. If some believe that starvation in Darfur is of no importance, they will learn nothing more about it than what is sometimes mentioned in mass media.

We can have knowledge about love and about some of the words and deeds that are often associated with love. But when we believe that someone loves us we respond to that love, and we come to know not just facts about love, but we also gain knowledge of loving and of being loved. And as we learn more about love or about any other aspect of life, our believing is either confirmed and increases, or is not affirmed, and diminishes. Believing leads to knowing in areas that we could not otherwise know, and new knowledge enables us to adjust our beliefs.

Not all beliefs are religious beliefs, but the act of believing is spiritual. We rely on our hearts, not just our minds, when we make decisions. Believing transcends our physical and material capacities, yet is a fully human activity. We judge our beliefs as rational, reasonable, and appropriate, based on our experiences of acting on those beliefs as much as we do upon hard scientific knowledge. When we decide about driving somewhere unfamiliar at night, or about fixing a broken lamp, we make use of beliefs about our abilities for dealing with those realities, as well as our knowledge of the options available to us.

Sometimes we say "we know" when we mean "we believe," and vice-versa. We know some things well enough to believe that we can base

our lives on them, or we believe strongly enough about some things to know that we must act in accord with those beliefs. The language is not as important as the reality: the "certainties" that support our decisions and actions are healthy human combinations of knowing and believing.

The daily news provides constant examples of the dark possibilities of knowing and believing. When individuals or groups of people believe that another individual or group is "evil" they seek to destroy them, not to know them or to learn anything about them. Negative beliefs restrict knowledge. Those who despise or hate others will not learn of God's plans for "those" people or for "us" either. Likewise, believing that other people are wholly "bad" does not allow for discovery of God's love as present in all persons, places, and things. We humans are capable of believing that other people are mainly to be feared or are objects of anger, so that learning is restricted to only those facts that elicit more fear and anger: a cycle of believing and learning that is almost entirely negative. Recognizing the possible misapplication of our spirituality can help us take care in choosing both what we are willing to know and what we are willing to believe.

Our openness to believing is of great importance in terms of what we might experience in life. If we engage an initial, tentative belief that God cares about us, individually and communally, we open ourselves to religious experiences. If we decide not to consider the possibility of God as personally concerned for us, we will most likely not recognize in our experiences anything that might indicate God's presence and action in our lives.

If we had all knowledge, but no beliefs, we would be like computers with huge hard drives; we would not be humans. Our happiness and fulfillment depend upon the connections we have and make between believing and knowing.