

“Only Don’t Know!”
S.E. Gilman
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The original sermon was introduced with two video reflections. They are included here.

Visual Reflection -- clip from “The Incredible Shrinking Man”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PW1GjvLic>

Musical Reflection -- Iris DeMent, “Let the Mystery Be”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlaoR5m4L80>

Sermon: “Only Don’t Know!”

ONLY DON’T KNOW is a phrase used by Buddhists that I absolutely did not understand. Not only did I not understand, but it made me panic a little. Because I HAD to know, ever since I was a kid, I HAD TO KNOW.

This is an old story from my childhood. My mom repeated it to me because I guess she thought it was funny. But she told me for years about the time that I came home from school, first grade I think -- one day smacking my head: D-O-G! Of course! So simple! C-A-T! Obvious! Why didn’t I KNOW THAT!?

Because I HAD TO KNOW. Life would be simple if I knew enough. So I had to learn everything I could. Maybe I could control something that way. Take charge of my life.

It’s amazing what I have forgotten by now – how I used to know the names and parts of plants, the kinds of clouds, everything in the natural world that seemed to surround me.

Thinking that if I learned enough I could control everything a kid has absolutely no control over, and since family was pretty much out of my control, I could do school, and school cooperated – it seemed to love me back, responded to my need to control the circumstances that could be laid out, goals to be met, met and moving on to the next.

But the BIG QUESTIONS? Why are we born? Why do we die? And what the heck are we doing here in between. ANSWERS! I WANT ANSWERS!

I knew by 16 after I got confirmed that Judaism is who I am and will be. Why else was I thrown out of my fourth grade Lutheran friends' Bible Class when I said that the Bible was stories, the human being wrote stories, and the Bible had some whoppers, but not written in lightning by the hand of God, because if God is a God, he gets no fingers and no hands, much less a birthday on December 25 th . That was fourth grade.

I read a lot. I raised myself and with the help of my big sister, found the public library the place for dreaming, for out of body travel in a book.

In my teens I found a translation of Thomas Merton of The Way of Chang Tzu. I read the Tao De Ching. I moved in the direction of the East early on.

But I'm born in the West. By the time I was 17, I was wearing black, wearing a beret and smoking like the cool kids. For my European philosophical forbearers, I found Sartre and Camus, and boy, there was no point. Times of expansion & ascension, the darkness of holocaust. We kept rolling that rock up the mountain, and down it rolls again.

From those moderns, to be is to do. I still pretty much feel that's the truth. It's by our actions that we make our and others' happiness or misery.

So when I moved to California in 1989, I met my first Western Buddhists. Four Noble Truths, truths like answers: 1. Life is full of suffering (This sits okay with Judaism)

2. Suffering arises from greed, willful ignorance, and hatred – craving and aversion. These three poisons turn the wheel of suffering. And the "I" who suffers we see as a self separate from others and identify with our ego.

Number 3: Recognizing these is the beginning of liberation, sometimes seen as the beginning of enlightenment and

4: the way out is the Eightfold Path: right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

Then you study a little more, and find the Heart Sutra in which there is no solidity to anything, that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. That samsara, sadness & suffering is no different than Nirvana, that the true lessons or Dharma cannot be expressed in words for our concepts, that the Buddha is only the finger pointing to the moon. The finger is not the moon, and so many confuse the finger for the inexpressible "beingness" of inter-being.

That's what the Zen koan says: "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." If you are so attached to conceptualizations and attachments to and external ideas or any spiritual authority, including your own understanding of the Buddha, you should "destroy" that concept or that idol and find your own realization of truth, your own Buddha-nature. Buddha is not an external idol – Buddha is your own mind, your own nature. Holding fast to a dogma or ideal becomes an idol. The Buddha on the road prevents your own true understanding.

What do we know? We spin in space surrounded and on the edge of a spiral, far away from other stars and their worlds. What is space made of? Dark matter. What's dark matter made of? We don't know.

What happens when we die? No one has come back to tell us that I know of, not even Harry Houdini, that trickster and skeptic. I had a friend, an incredible egoist who would call me several times a week talking about what he had published and the money he made from writing that I never have. He was a sweet and infuriating friend, kind of obnoxious but lonely and kind. I doubt that if there was an afterlife or even persistence of ghosts, I was sure I'd hear from Scott Green, but I never have.

So what do we know? Pierre is the capital of South Dakota. Water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit. We need conventional knowledge to function, writes Zen Master Judith Roitman, another good Jewish girl and a mathematician and set theorist who became a Zen teacher. Her training is from the Korean Zen tradition.

Names and labels and nouns and verbs are approximations for what Roitman calls our "cognitive set-up." We have ways of setting up the world that ties things down for us, that makes it make sense. We make distinctions that make the world make sense – but where does the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic Ocean start or stop, and what difference does it make to ocean? It helps us mark a place. And the names will change over time as civilizations change names. Who knew I grew up on the Gulf of America? We called it the Gulf of Mexico.

Where is Awakened Mind? Nowhere abiding. Just look. Just take it in. No judgment, no label. There is no essentialist answer that can't be picked apart. The preconceptions disappear the closer we look or the bigger we pull the camera back. Answers disappear. Neurophysiology, electric impulses, chemical soups, from galaxies to sub-atomic particles. The world is incredibly complex. Roitman paraphrases the Diamond Sutra this way: "What is True Knowing? It is NOT KNOWING."

Keep your eyes open. Keep the wonder. Not knowing keeps the door open, stops the mind from storying. Too much storying can make you talk to yourself like my patients at the state hospital.

Sure, you can keep the functional. But for the big questions? Only DON'T KNOW.