

## What Is “Knowing,” and Can It Be Learned?

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From time to time someone will ask me, very seriously, Can you teach me how to listen to my intuition, or, learn what you call, *knowing*? This *knowing*, is knowing things that in western thinking I cannot know. Like knowing who is calling before picking up the phone when it rings. Or, slowing down, for no apparent reason, when there is a speed trap around the next corner—placed there because drivers cannot see it before they are in range of the machines that measure speed. Or knowing that this plant is unhappy and needs to be moved to another place. Some call this *intuition*. I am convinced that *knowing* is not a supernatural, or unusual, capability. Many animals have it, and it is not rare among humans.

Can it be learned?

Yes, probably.

Can it be taught?

Maybe.

I learned it, so someone else should be able too, right?

I was fortunate, there were a few times in my life that, when I desperately needed help, I *knew* what to do, and did it, without hesitation. *Knowing* saved my life a few times.

Here is how I learned it — learned it again, after I had been heavily conditioned by a western academic training. I learned, again, to see wholes. I could see everything related to everything else, without having to take it apart first, as a scientist does, naming the smallest piece of the whole, preferably with some made-up Latin-sounding name. My learning was not a project, my teacher never explained anything. He asked, We walk? Yes, I answered, we walk.

Many years after that, I found an exercise that may work for some. This was in one of the earliest books of Carlos Castaneda, I think. I have expanded on what, in the book, was a simple statement. Perhaps, Castaneda was talking about the same thing I am. (I no longer have his books, but have looked for it, and never found it again).

Here's the exercise:

You sit in front of a plant, a bush. You are comfortable, relaxed. You see the leaves, some stems. You can see them because the light is clear, and between the leaves you can see the white of a bright day. You see the bush against a background.

Really look at each leaf. Look at patterns you see. The outline, the stem, branches.

You see the different colors, the gradations of green perhaps. You see shadows and reflections. Take your time. Observe details. If you think about it, you probably will name: emerald green, or brown, or rough, or shiny. Try not to name, just observe. Get into the essence of that plant.

When you have all that in your head, *now you reverse your seeing*. You see the background, maybe blue sky, or white, or even darkness around and between the leaves of the plant as the object, what you are seeing. That background now becomes the object that you see. The bush is now background!

True, it is not easy to do that. It will take many tries perhaps. We are taught to see things against a background, we are taught to single out objects against a neutral background. We name things, which makes them separate. Any thing that we name is by definition a unit, a something, different from the background. And, also by definition, it is unique. or, if not unique, then part of a category of things that is unique in being different from other categories.

What the exercise does, is to break that conditioning.

What it requires is a new kind of awareness.

You'll say, But I am aware (meaning, not asleep). That is not the kind of awareness I mean. The experiment of reversing object and background demonstrates different ways of seeing.

In the west we are taught, from the first day of life, to see our world as things against a background. We teach language by learning words: nose, finger, smile, hair, and when we have learned things, we learn good! Which also is taught as a thing, it is different than bad. Mama will love you if you do this, if you don't do this then you are bad.

But not everyone learns that way. Once I made a very short, two day visit, to a tribe of "wild" people. I did not speak their language, we did not have any language in common. We had done well enough pointing and smiling, but I wanted to talk. So I pointed to myself, and said, Robert. They nodded, smiled, and all said, Robert. No, no, it is I, me, who is Robert. It is my name. You (I was smart enough to know not to point a finger, but pointed my chin) and my eyebrows went up to signal a question. You? Big smiles, no names. Of course I gave up. We communicated with smiles and gestures the rest of the time. A few weeks later I recalled my attempts at communication to an anthropologist, who had studied that tribe. But how did you get to even see them, he asked? Well, that's another whole story. Then he told me that, in fact, they don't have a word for I. Or, the word they have... Then I remembered that, of course, in Malay, the language I knew growing up, there was no word for I, or, rather, it was thought very rude to talk about yourself. Today, the official word for I used to mean "your servant, your slave." Then, my anthropologist friend continued, These people have very strange ideas about themselves; they have a hard time seeing themselves apart from animals. And their words for parts of their body are vague, to say the least. Yes, I knew about that. In Hawaiian, for instance, *lima* means five, it also means hand, it also means arm. It all depends, as they say.

Imagine growing up in a world where you learn to talk not in terms of things, but in terms of relations. Land, which we think of as a thing, to be owned, bought and sold, in many other languages is thought of as the earth, the skin of Mother Earth, something dear and dear to me, to be cherished, taken care of, but the very opposite of property!

We condition children from very early on to be independent. Your own crib, your own bed, your own room. You are responsible for yourself. The world out there is a jungle, you have to fight to get ahead. It is good to compete, to be better than.

And so, with the help of parents, teachers and all the structures of our societies, we learn to see the world as a man-made structure, that we better make an effort to fit in. We know that even Evolution is about survival of the fittest, which we are told, means the strongest, the meanest, the most ruthless.

In that world, “knowing” does not fit. You cannot *know* something that logically you cannot know. Period.

Of course, not all children are raised that way. In the societies I grew up in, and some of those I lived in, all children in a village are loved. Unconditionally. After a child can walk around, she is considered a person. You cannot tell a person what to do. Mothers will ask a three year-old, whether he wants the shot the doctor prescribes. If the child says, No, that’s it. No argument. But, the nurse will say, it is for his own good! The mother will look astonished, unbelieving: But he said, No!

Children do not have their own bed, their own room. They’re not told to compete—in fact, it is considered very bad form to excel. The rich man in the village has a house exactly like the house of his neighbor, and his car is parked far away from the village.

Those children grow up with a security western children do not know. They know they are loved, they know they belong. They don’t have to fight to become someone important or rich. there is always the village. They most certainly do not “belong” to their parents. If they belong at all, it is with the village (to me, there is a difference to belonging to, and belonging with).

In that world, *knowing* is possible, accepted, not unusual. It does not mean that someone who *knows* is better or smarter or more of anything. It just is.

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All that I realized only gradually, years later. This kind of *knowing*, so strange and “unreasonable” to us in the west, is (was) accepted in other societies, much as we accept seeing and hearing, one of the senses. The “primitive” people I got to know, did not think it strange or unusual, to sit somewhere in the jungle. Not really waiting, but when I came along, they got up and walked ahead of me to the little village, without a word.

It fitted in their way of life. They just *knew*.

Although there was no way for me to let them know when I would come to visit a new settlement where I had never been before, nevertheless, without fail, someone would sit on the path, “waiting for me,” I thought. How did they know I was coming?

In western thinking there was literally no way for them to know. There was no telephone, no mail. No message had been sent by someone else. I myself often did not know I had time to go until the moment I could leave. It was rarely planned, even a day before. And yet they *knew*.

When I asked them, they denied that they knew I was coming. No, they were just sitting there. But why are you sitting there?

Why not?

It took me more than a year to figure out that this kind of knowing is often not specific. They did not know it was I, who was coming, but they had a hunch, we would call it, that they might get a visitor — although in their thinking, they were even less specific. It would be good to sit there, at that time. They had no expectations.

How difficult that is for us to understand!

We cannot imagine *not* having expectations. We plan. We plan our future, we have a schedule, an agenda. We have meals at set times, rather than when we are hungry.

We, westerners, live in a highly structured world. We've made it that way. Everything in our world is man-made. What's left of Nature is made into a park, a lawn, a protected "wilderness area," (protected only as long as it does not hurt our mysterious "economy"). We need roads to tell us how to get from here to there. We even make rules about what kind of shoes we tolerate on a lawn of all grass, no weeds!

We can no longer even imagine how a true Wild piece of nature feels.

Everything in our man-made world is made for a reason. And, more often than not, there are two or more very different reasons behind everything we do. There is the official reason: *for the public good*. Then there is a political reason: *an official needs to be reelected so the road is laid where it will benefit the people most likely to vote for him*. The contractor has yet another reason, *he needs to make money to pay off a debt*. There are many layers of reasons in almost everything that is done in our man-made world.

And it is all so complicated, we don't want to know about it.

In the natural world, where man is simply one of the many forms of Life, there are no reasons, as we understand the word. The Wild exists, all life forms exist within that reality. In that reality there are *relationships*.

We think predators are enemies of prey. Not so. In the Wild, predators and prey have close relations, each is dependent on the other for survival of the species (which is more important than survival of an individual). If a tiger kills too many deer, the deer do not reproduce, and next year the tiger is hungry. If the people who live in the jungle hunt more than they can use, they have damaged their own home.

People who rely on the Wild learn from the first day of life not to interfere with the Whole more than strictly necessary, because if they do, next year they will starve. Wild people, as well as animals, walk with a soft footstep.

We stomp.

We see the world as a stage, in which we play roles in a man-made setting against a painted back drop.

In the Wild (the natural world) people see relations. Everything is related to everything, and that includes us.

In the natural world people think WE; in the man-made world, we think ME.

Generalizations, of course. Not untrue, but too simple.

In our western world *knowing*, is distrusted, because it is not rational, it cannot be proven, there is no research. It does not fit a way of life that is highly structured by conventions, customs, laws, rules, agendas, etc.

In the natural world *knowing* is one of the many ways we perceive, in order to survive in the whole.

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Living in a western society, I cherish the occasional flash of *knowing*. It is “nice” to come to the gate at the very moment that a visitor drives up. But not essential. I don’t rely on it. I don’t expect to *know*. In fact, I try to live without expectations. Each morning is a new beginning. I try not to make plans. I may have thoughts about needing to buy some more blank CDs, but it does not have to be tomorrow. It depends. If I feel up to the drive, and the weather is good, I get in the car, pointing the way to town. But, every now and then my car turns around, as I like to think of it. I *know*, this is not the day to go to town. Oh, I am fortunate to be able to do this! I have no nine to five responsibilities, I don’t *have* to do anything. I am fortunate to have the luxury of *knowing*. I am very lucky. I have a strong dreaming that living this way may be the right way to live. Not today, of course. But, if there is a future, we probably will have to allow ourselves to relax into the natural rhythms of the planet again, as we, humans, did for so many thousands of years. We could live again without the driving stresses of ever more, more of everything. We would not have to destroy the earth, we could live within it (I want to say “her,” but of course the earth is not feminine — “it” feels too crude, however).

Flow with the flow.

If we want electricity to run some machines, have light when it is dark outside, have a computer, it would be much more reasonable, it seems to me, to generate electricity locally. Why do we think centralizing everything is more efficient? It obviously is not. It requires a horrendous infrastructure. And it may well be that some groups of people would like to have power, and others would prefer to do without.

Why do we want to travel around the world? Why do we need to, as some people think? My dream even includes things like living without a telephone. If I want to talk with someone 5000 miles away, I ought to be able to talk with her in my mind.

I really do not need to eat fruit that was grown halfway across the world, where it is grown in enormous plantations, undoubtedly with tons of chemicals. I eat what grows around where I happen to be.

Here, in the tropics, I don’t need many clothes (and I don’t have many). I have no suits, no ties, no shoes even, only a few pair of sandals.

I like my (second-hand) washing machine, but I don’t need a dryer. From a western point of view, the people I knew who lived harmoniously in the jungle, were extremely *poor*. They wore almost no clothes, ate a very simple diet, had no possessions. In fact, the idea of *owning* was strange to them. Also, they had no individual ambition, they had no expectations of improving themselves, rising out of their way of life, changing, progress

toward a new reality, and all the other glowing terms we have to describe our civilization. They were not like us, nor did they aspire to be.

But they smiled, they sang. Perhaps most important, theirs was a sustainable world. If we had not interfered (and how can we not interfere?) they would have continued to live and love and play and die, living the same life for the next hundred thousand years, as they lived the last hundred thousand years.

Our so-called civilization, which now spans the globe, is destructive of the environment and therefore not sustainable. It seems to me, it cannot be made sustainable any more. A planetary ecology that is so totally dominated by one species, busy extinguishing all life forms that do not profit us, **cannot be**.

But apparently, we are all asleep and willing to sit and watch this slide down the slippery slope.

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I'm suspicious of "how to" books. Of course, I know they sell. Today's people apparently hunger for someone to tell them how to live. And every teacher has his or her own words, ideas, thoughts. Many find what they call "wisdom" in foreign and/or ancient traditions, and then cannot wait to translate in modern idiom what the Incas, the Mayans, the Egyptians, some tribe in the Amazon, or in Peru, Hindus, Buddhists of all colors and flavors knew. There must be thousands of these books on the market at any one time.

But... Actually, two buts.

The first but is a matter of money. Most of the people who write How To books did not pay the tribe they learned from, for the information they were given. But the author gets paid for his book — and probably is paid more for the workshops he conducts to teach that foreign bit of information, which he has made to fit into our present chaotic state of mind.

The other but is more important.

It is very difficult, and personally I think perhaps impossible, to translate just one piece, one concept, one method of meditation, say, from one way of seeing reality, to another way of seeing reality. It's a matter of language, but language is an expression of a culture, which is a way of seeing reality.

I write about this in almost everything I write. I am obsessed with seeing reality from a different point of view. I know that in today's world there are many who understand this only too well: they have experienced the difficulty in their own life. But to people who have not experienced another way of seeing, it is hard to describe.

We see a reality of things against a background. We give names to things. What is important in our way of experiencing reality are concepts like reason, control, rules, regularity, predictability — although, at the same time, many of us (perhaps most) cling to notions of an unknowable deity, an after life, perhaps even a series of lives.

Our world is organized very tightly, we create and then become utterly dependent on infrastructures. Literally everything in our reality has a price, expressed in money and/or time. Yes, time has a price.

We think ourselves forward-looking, enamored of what we call progress, which means more, more of everything and anything.

We never hesitate to change the physical world on a whim. We rarely consider consequences beyond, say, the next quarter (of a year). In short, “we boldly go where none has gone before,” to borrow a slogan from a popular entertainment.

We also—and this is important to remember—believe that all people are like us, just a bit behind, or not as smart as we are.

We cannot imagine that there are whole tribes of people who do not share our view of reality.

That makes translation of concepts from another culture into modern English tricky. English is a rich language, it has many words. It comes as a surprise, then, that other languages have words for concepts we cannot quite imagine.

What is more critical, however, is that the “wisdom” we may learn from another culture (present or past) is part of a culture, part of a whole that is not like ours. There are no concepts that are not intimately, and inextricably, connected to other ways of seeing reality.

Many Indian nations of the North American continent had the custom of smoking a sacred pipe. Using this sacred pipe—often handed from grandfather to grandson over many generations—probably involved a special occasion, it involved a specific ritual that was embedded in the world view of that culture. From what I have learned, the smoke was usually blown in the six directions (our four, and above and below).

We, our civilization knows pipes. To us a pipe is a simple tool, used for relaxation. It has no sacred meanings. A pipe is something you buy, use, throw away. Like a tooth brush, or a pair of shoes.

I cannot imagine how a Catholic priest could use an Indian Pipe in a Mass (I’m not sure which of those words should be capitalized, so I capitalize them all). As I understand a Mass, it is the celebration of the body and the blood of Christ. Nothing to do with smoking, or the six directions, or preparing for a steam ceremony. And yet, I know, that someone once wrote an article about just that.

There are dozens, probably many dozens, of books about Hawaiian religion, ideas, methods of doing this, that, or the other. I find it difficult to understand how a concept that is part of the Hawaiian way of seeing reality can be fitted into our western way of seeing.

Hawaiians, for instance, had (still have!) a very strong conviction that land cannot be owned. It must be cherished, taken care of, honored. But it is never real estate.

Another example. For many years I had a career in teaching people what we call Family Planning. Of course that had to be translated in other languages. The word “planning” does not exist in most languages, it seems a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon idea. Even many

European languages use the English word. That created difficulties. How do you explain that it is possible to decide how many children you want to conceive, and when? A greater difficulty, however, is to plan a "family." We use the word *family* frequently and easily. It means mother, father, and two and a half children, according to Census statistics. But most languages that I came across have no word for mother, father, children. In Hawaiian, as in all Polynesian languages, there is a word, "Ohana," which is translated "family," but it means mother, father, children, aunts and uncles, grandparents several generations back, cousins and second cousins, adopted children, and sometimes even close friends, or people living with the family. So, "planning" an extended family is total nonsense! I might be able to consider planning how many children I want to conceive, but how can I plan for all those others?

I learned that even such simple, everyday words, trip us up when dealing with people of another culture. *They think differently!* They value differently. Hawaiians, and all other island people I know love children. The more the merrier. The idea of controlling that wealth was unthinkable. As it was unthinkable to us, not many generations ago — and, as it is becoming unthinkable again among so-called Born A-gains.

I find it confusing to consider Hawaiians, sincere, lovely people who want to teach Hawaiian culture — and yet they are Christian. The idea of one creator God does not exist in Hawaiian culture. But, as we all know, humans have an amazing ability to accept contradictory concepts without much difficulty.

We all do that, today. We think nothing of eating foods from all over the world. Unfortunately, mixing bits and pieces of other cultures in one's own way of seeing reality leads to confusion.

Today, there are millions, perhaps billions of people, who are confused. They come from one culture and suddenly find themselves in another. Unless you have experienced this, it is hard to imagine the disorientation this causes.

There seem to be two ways of dealing with this.

One is to cling to the old ways. We call that "fundamentalism." Some Muslims, who find themselves in a western, materialistic, individualistic society, cling to the most fundamental interpretation of their religion.

Or, another way to deal with an undigested mix of values and views, is to accept it *all*. We "believe" this and also that. We believe all religions are the same, all people are the same, all political parties are the same. Words become meaningless, because everything can mean anything (I am quoting a friend).

There is a growing list of words that I try to avoid, because they have lost all meaning; words like God, democracy, belief, hope, progress, freedom, and so on. (All the words politicians love most)

The current avalanche of How-To books is like the rash of "workshops" during the seventies. I did the workshops. One after another, as they became "the latest." Now I can't even remember the names of the different ways to become a better person, more



this or more that. But after the fourth, or fifth, I knew that they were not for me. They confused more than enlightened.

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And so we come to today. A time when every idea, every concept, every ritual that ever was, is available to everyone. The Age of Information. An age when everyone has access to every piece of information there is, at any time.

So, of course, we choose what we want to listen to, what fits at least something of our own particular mix of beliefs (I use that word ironically). We *have* to choose, there is too much!

Or, we can reject it all, and stick to the old ways.

And, as we are learning daily, information has a price. We have to pay for it, and, someone has to pay to make it available.

Consequently, information becomes advertising, or propaganda.

In the Age of Information, we no longer communicate. I've read this book, you've read another. Or, I remember this idea from the book you also read, but you remember a different idea. We are more familiar with the prophecies supposed to be in the Mayan Calendar than in our own history. To be sure, our history books omit all the unpleasant details, omits mention of millions of people and their worlds. Is anything "true" any more?

So, we have begun to listen more to tone of voice, gestures, the thrust of a chin, the bored look in a speaker's eyes. We don't read much any more, we scan. Millions of people don't read at all, but listen to The News (in caps). Some of us know that The News also has been paid for, and is advertising and propaganda.

The Tower of Babel (which is Babylon, a few miles south of Baghdad, and until a few weeks ago a major base of the American Forces—driving tanks over ancient ruins, ruins ancient ruins). Forgive me, I cannot help these word plays!

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Can one learn to *know*?

Why not? It is a normal ability of humans, and many animals. It has (had?) obvious survival value.

However, what I've spent most of this essay arguing, *knowing* does not fit into contemporaneous western societies, where it is considered strange, unbelievable, and probably suspect.

You may not *want* to *know*!

And that, my friends, is what I *know*.

Not much.

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