Virtues of knowing

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by Carol Zaleski in the October 18, 2011 issue

Transfiguration, Alexandr Andreevich Ivanov (1806–1858).

It was the second Sunday in Lent and, following an ancient Christian practice, the gospel reading for the day was an account of the Transfiguration.

The first-graders, who would receive their first communion in a few weeks, were stationed in the front pews. Our pastor, as is his custom on such occasions, came down from the pulpit to address them in simple words. He began by quizzing them gently about the readings. "I wonder if you can help us understand this story about Jesus and his friends." The children had been well coached and had no difficulty answering his prompts. "Where did Jesus and his friends go?" "To a mountain!" "Who was standing next to Jesus?" "Moses!" "Anyone else?" "Elijah!"

Turning to the congregation, our pastor began to sum things up: "The disciples were obviously astonished to see Christ in glory standing next to Moses and Elijah. They could not have understood that they were witnessing a prefiguring of the resurrection." In the midst of this discourse, a little girl in the front pew raised her hand to ask a question: "Father," she said, "what does 'obviously' mean?"

Our pastor was prepared to be asked what resurrection means; but obviously? Leave it to a first-grader to raise the tough questions.

It got me thinking, though. What, in fact, does *obviously* mean? How can we be sure that we are all sufficiently on the same page to call an inference obvious (in this case, that the disciples were astonished to see Christ in glory because they did not foresee the resurrection)?

Like plainly or *naturally*, *obviously* suggests an observation or inference that is present to all minds, public, self-evident and in every way unlikely to produce a bouleversement. It cannot be momentous to realize a truth that is obvious. There's nothing astonishing about the statement that Peter, James and John were astonished; who wouldn't be? The Transfiguration is an extraordinary and momentous story, but if we step inside its framework, we find that all the ordinary rules of logic and human psychology still apply.

To take a different instance: a friend of mine has a spiritual life coach who channels an entity named Enoch from a different space-time continuum. ("I wonder," my friend remarked to me the other day, "if he is the same as the biblical Enoch.") It turns out that my friend's Enoch, though extradimensional, is a font of sensible advice, full of obvious truths about relationships, money and dieting. These obvious truths hold good even though the framework of the story is, as far as I can see, obvious nonsense.

Again, it makes me wonder: what are the conditions for a judgment to have a force like that of self-evidence? Conversely, how far can we trust our impressions of what's obvious if we're surrounded by people who don't share them? The desire for knowledge, as Aristotle maintained, is as natural as the desire for happiness—and just as fundamental to human flourishing. Where rival knowledge claims abound, the ability to discriminate between them is a basic survival skill. Christians have to contend with the fact that to the skeptic, the only obvious point about the Transfiguration account is that Peter, James and John were caught up in a shared hallucination, while to the credulous, the story is readily believable but on the same level as the trance communications of the extradimensional Enoch.

Is there a knowledge doctor in the house? Fortunately, yes: there are epistemologists—philosophers who investigate what it means to know something and to know that we know it. More than one epistemology sits comfortably with

Christian faith, but the best approach, to my mind, would be one that combines the attractive characteristics of a pragmatist (open-mindedness, corrigibility, trust, sociability) with the confidence in reason of a realist and the humility, curiosity and teachability of a child.

Among new approaches to the theory of knowledge, "virtue epistemology" (Ernest Sosa gave it this name in 1991) has much to recommend it; and among virtue epistemologists, Linda Zagzebski (author of *Virtues of the Mind,* among other books) has much to offer Christians trying to navigate the contemporary intellectual world. Twentieth-century epistemology typically defined knowledge as "justified true belief," but Zagzebski treats knowledge as, in effect, virtuous belief. "A belief that is *good in every respect,* like an act that is good in every respect, has the following features," Zagzebski writes. "(1) It is virtuously motivated. (2) It imitates the behavior of virtuous persons in relevantly similar circumstances. (3) It reaches the truth because of features (1) and (2)." Zagzebski focuses attention on the character of the knower and on the crucial role that virtues and good affections like trust, admiration, courage, responsibility and humility play in forming true beliefs. Her approach is sapiential in the tradition of Anselm, John Henry Newman and (despite differences) Alvin Plantinga. Truth is objective; but to reach the truth is a striving that involves the whole acting, knowing, loving person—which is just what we were told when the Truth in person walked among us.