

What we know and what I don't

All knowledge is communal, but that's easy to forget.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue



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My wife still laughs about it 35 years later. She had purchased a Bible trivia game, believing it was the perfect gift for her fiancé and his divinity school friends. When she brought it out one evening, however, and my friends and I saw that we were going to be competing with each other, we quickly lost interest. Nobody wanted to risk exposing his or her biblical ignorance in front of fellow seminarians. After some awkward laughter, we agreed to modify the rules and play the game as a single team.

I thought about that experience recently when a colleague of mine laughed at me for never having watched *Game of Thrones*. Not only have I not seen the program, I don't know what it's about. I could display similar ignorance in several dimensions of pop music and film culture, if you allow me to hoist my white flag of vulnerability.

Most of us are guilty at one time or another of snickering at friends who don't know something we know. "You mean you've never been to IKEA?" "You don't know who Kendall Jenner is?" "Everybody knows what a chatbot is!" The "Oh, my" we mutter next, paired with our own little eye roll, completes the not-so-subtle mockery. When we know something well, we find it hard to imagine that others around us don't know the exact same thing. A kind of hubris sets in—a twinge of superiority. Something in us seems to enjoy knowing little bits of information that people around us don't know. Our chuckle lets them in on our pride.

Bernard of Clairvaux writes of people who seek knowledge for the sake of curiosity. He writes of other people who seek knowledge to serve and edify their neighbor through love. But still other people, says Bernard, "desire to know in order that they themselves may be known: that is vanity." I wonder if some quiet vanity creeps into some of our knowledge claims, convincing us that we know and understand more than we actually do.

In their recent book *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*, Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach say we're not so good at knowing what we don't know. We underestimate our own ignorance, confusing the knowledge that's within in our own heads with what we constantly rely on from other people and external associations. In other words, knowledge is communal. Complex webs of shared information allow a lot of our cursory knowledge to reside in other people's heads. As individuals, we know surprisingly less than we often think we do, even if we have our own little domains of expertise.

Something in the Christian life ought to inspire us to limit our arrogance about certain things we know and, at the same time, nurture a disposition of gratitude for those who know what we don't. Theologian Leslie Weatherhead once noted that the word *agnostic* has a constructive place in Christian conversation. The agnostic who is uncertain about God—different from the atheist, who denies the existence of God—and who says with powerful honesty, "I don't know," may be on the road to great faith. That would be true of the apostle Paul, who celebrated what he didn't know or understand about God. And it can be true of us who discover that knowing

God is a shared endeavor more than just an individual experience.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "What we know together."