Googling my way out of a pastoral relationship

The man turned in a visitor card. I pulled up my web browser.

by [Ragan Sutterfield](#) in the [August 14, 2019](#) issue

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The man shook my hand after the service, tall and friendly, but timid in a way. He'd visited the week before and was wondering: "How do I join the church?" He had been raised in another tradition, he explained, but had drifted away—its theology was no longer his. I offered to meet for coffee and hear his story. "Fill out a visitor card," I said, handing him a small slip of paper. "I'll give you a call this week and get something on the calendar."

Monday morning the card sat on my desk next to my computer. I read his name and address. The road and zip code were unfamiliar, so I typed them into the search bar on my browser. Real estate records showed the price that had been paid for the property, satellite images displayed the house situated on a peri-urban lot, Google Street View displayed images of a white frame house set back from the road.

I wondered what this man did for a living, if there were any details or connections that might be helpful for our conversation. I entered his name in quotes and added our city.

The results ran down the page—Whitepages, Spokeo, PeopleFinders, but then there were mugshot tabloids and newspaper crime beat summaries. I clicked on one, and beneath a flashing banner ad there was a picture of the man I'd just met, a tired scowl on his face, black and white markings in feet and inches behind him. Under his picture his charge was given, a violent felony. I felt a chill. Though the nature of the charge was unlikely to mean a threat to anyone in our pews, the simple fact of his violent criminality altered how I felt about his presence at our church, from welcome seeker to dangerous visitor.

When I called him and got no answer I didn't bother trying again. I felt a relief in the hope that perhaps this visitor had moved on. But with time that relief began to bother me. What, after all, was the story? I knew only a few facts but with no context, no disclosure by which to understand them. Maybe it was his arrest that had propelled him back to church? Maybe his charges were understandable in a certain circumstance? I had no way of knowing any of this except through a conversation and most likely a conversation that would come with the building of trust and relationship; the kind of conversation that I would hope would mark all of those interactions we call "pastoral."

My own pastoral ministry is young, and it has always lived within easy reach of the Internet. With a past in sales and journalism, I came to pastoral work well versed in what makes a good Internet search, tracking down people and information about them. Google had become a go-to for introductions and background research, a way to understand someone's work and life without having to pry too much.

I'm trying to resist the desire to know about people before I know them.

For ongoing connections and occasions for pastoral care, I came to rely on Facebook. Though I adopted the policy of a mentor of never requesting a connection with parishioners, the people in my congregation quickly began to send friend requests. With each one I learned what seemed to be insight into who they were—their likes, their dislikes, their sense of humor, their political proclivities, the circles of connection we shared. Through my Facebook feed I was able to see the joys and hopes, the frustrations and the pains of many in my pews.

With search engines feeding my need for pastoral information and social media enabling pastoral connections, I lived for a time in all of the glowing promises of a tech company advertisement. Technology wasn't diminishing my pastoral work, it seemed; it was extending and strengthening it. But with this unsettling visitor my sense of the Internet's role in pastoral life was challenged. Here was someone in my church who had come looking for connection with whom I disconnected because of what I found on the Internet. This forced me to ask: Are the tools of soft surveillance helpful to being a pastor? Is social media a means of connection or is it only the distracting semblance of real relationship?

As I've reflected on these questions, I've come to think about them in terms of understanding, with two alternative paths toward that end. The alternatives are what I would call algorithmic understanding and novelistic understanding. They are both ways of knowing, they both assemble information and produce insight, but they are different in both their ends and means.

To know others algorithmically is to understand them as inputs leading to outputs, as data points that produce a picture. We see the photographs of people's children and grandchildren, the articles they share, the public records of their arrests and divorces, their addresses. It would be easy to create an image of someone from all of this. It would be easy even to imagine that we understand them and know them. But it would also be easy to let that image and relationship stand in for something far more complex, something far deeper. There is an encounter that comes when we personally share the realities of our lives with one another or with a pastor that is different from sharing information through a post; there is a difference between a pastor coming to understand someone through an ongoing conversation that builds trust and the knowing that comes through an Internet search.

In an opinion piece for the *New York Times*' Privacy Project, novelist KJ Dell'Antonia offered her own increasing skepticism of sharing news online. "The more I reserve both good news and personal challenges for sharing directly with friends, the more I see that the digital world never offered the same satisfaction or support," she writes. "Instead, I lost out on moments of seeing friends' faces light up at joyful news, and frequently found myself wishing that not everyone within my network had been privy to a rant or disappointment."

Pastors' knowledge of others should be novelistic—focused on character, not data.

While Dell'Antonia is speaking of sharing information, I think something of the same can be said of hearing it as well. When a friend shares good news or bad online, it is hard to be with that person in either the joy or the sorrow through a comment, like, or, worse yet, an emoji. There is a real loss of empathy and human connection in this mediated form of relationship. It is a loss that I think we have not even begun to understand but has a great deal to do with the fact that we are not merely minds but bodies, bodies that communicate in vast and complex ways that include touch, smell, and a plethora of signals that no screen or virtual interaction can replace.

Finding publicly available information through an Internet search is at an even further remove from this. It is, as it was once understood to be, a kind of voyeurism through which we watch with no permission the disclosure of a person's life. That we have failed to see searching for someone as voyeurism points to the success of the deliberate erosion of the personal into the public by the Internet monopolies. Google once offered free business cards as a promotion. It was simply a person's name shown in a Google search bar. Such a form of introduction is good for Google; it is destructive to the forms of personal knowledge through which authentic relationship is found.

In my relationship with God and neighbor, as cultivated through the church and its scriptures and practices, I am seeking an authenticity of encounter that goes beyond the surface, the searchable, the algorithmic. When I look at myself, I realize that so much of my person is simply a construct meant to hide what is really inside and that much of my progress in the spiritual life is to tear down that construct so that I can simply be who I actually am before God and neighbor.

It is the role of the pastor both to model this search for authenticity and to help our parishioners in their own search. What we learn of each other from algorithms is of little help in this. It plays into the lies of identity that Henri Nouwen articulated as "I am what I do," "I am what I have," and "I am what other people say about me." There could be little better summary of the kind of knowing of a person facilitated by both online search and social media than that list. What we need instead is another way of knowing a person pastorally. That way I call novelistic.

"Novelistic truth," as critics Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan put it, "is not data, not reportage, not documentary, not philosophical tenet, not political slogan. Novelistic truth is dramatic, which means above all it has to do with character. . . . In exploring character, the novel's key strength is the disclosure of human interiority." Interiority

is critical here, it is interiority that provides the difference between a novel and a film, between a novel and a piece of journalism. I think we could easily replace *novelistic* with *pastoral* in the sentence above and get something close to the kind of personal knowing we should seek; the kind of personal knowing that both online search and social media obscure more than extend.

Eugene Peterson, writing well before the age of pervasive social media, saw the importance of this kind of truth for pastoral ministry. In *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Peterson talks of the temptation to know people on their surface and find them little more than dull types—the ambitious business person, the suburbanite, the social climber, and so on. To help overcome such a tendency Peterson read the novels of Dostoevsky as a way of training himself to see people in their complex interiority. As Peterson writes, "when I came across dull people, I inserted them into one of the novels to see what Dostoevsky would make of them. It wasn't long before the deeper dimensions developed, the eternal hungers and thirsts—and God. I started finding Mozartean creativity in adolescents and Sophoclean tragedies in the middle-aged. The banality was a cover." Far from reducing people to characters, such a way of seeing opens up the vision of a person to what is beyond the image. It is like the difference between an idol and an icon—idols close around and contain the divine in an image, icons open up our vision to the divine beyond the image. Such is the difference between algorithmic knowing and novelistic/pastoral knowing.

How do we live into such pastoral knowing in an age when search engines are so enticing, and Facebook has engineered our attention to be glued to its illusions of connection? Such questions should be among our most critical concerns culturally, but also pastorally. I cannot offer a solution that will fit every situation, but here are some of the practices I've begun to help my own pastoral ministry.

In the realm of online searching, I see little hope other than discipline. But like other forms of discipline there are supporting systems that can ease the work of self-control. One of them, in fact, is a computer program called SelfControl." It is among a host of programs that will block particular websites or the entire Internet for particular periods of time. Many creative professionals and others who need to spend time on a computer to do concentrated work are turning to these tools as ways of getting the good from computers and the Internet without the distractions. I use these programs to block searches, news websites, and the like during periods when I am trying to do work that would be diminished by distraction. This includes following up on pastoral care concerns or newcomer outreach. Over time the tools

have helped me break habits of searching for information about people online, and I need these tools less and less.

On the positive side I try to ask: What is the most personal and direct way to make contact with this person? Often for an initial meeting that is a phone call and then a personal visit. Occasionally email could be employed. There are times when text messages or Facebook direct messages might be appropriate, but I try to keep those to a minimum. And of course, a personal note in our age of easy communications can do wonders. Overall the goal is the highest level of personal engagement with the lowest level of mediation. Another way to think about this is to employ the language used in family systems theory about closing a triangle. We could consider the Internet (especially searching and social media) as the third "person" in a triangle, and our work should be to collapse the triangle and force direct interaction where it can be had.

Searching and social media, as I've argued, are different but related temptations. My own strategy with social media has been to delete my accounts. I have suffered no significant downsides from the move. Yes, I have missed out on casual updates from casual contacts. Yes, I have missed *some* announcements in the lives of some of my congregation. But knowing that I am not online has also encouraged many people to reach out by phone or in person, to catch me after the service and tell me what is happening in their lives. Not being on social media often helps to force people into a more authentic interaction that requires more effort but also results in greater rewards.

I have also been able to recover the attention that is essential for pastoral care. When it comes to attention and social media, I am convinced the game is rigged and zero sum. By not having social media accounts and taking the additional step of getting rid of my smartphone I've found that I've been able to be significantly more present to the people before me. I know those who are able to balance being online and paying attention, but I know myself not to be one of them. By limiting my time online to deliberate moments in front of a computer I have opened up my attentiveness to the other moments of my life. It's a personal choice, but it is one that has been of great benefit in my relationships to the people around me, including my pastoral relationships.

The work of a pastor, the vocation of all Christians in prayer, is to be attentive to God and neighbor. The question of our use of technologies and their platforms

should be guided by that work. What helps us pay attention to God and neighbor? What tools help us facilitate our love of our neighbors and God? Through my encounter with a seeking stranger, I found my own use of the tools of our age questioned, and so I've sought to share those questions with you. There are surely a variety of ways to inhabit the world as a pastor in this age, and I do not mean to prescribe a path for others. But from my conversations with others I believe that I am not alone in my struggles or in the help I have found by minimizing my use of online searching, social media, and distracting technologies in my work as a pastor.

The next time someone comes through the doors of my church I will greet them, ask for their story, pull out my paper calendar, and set a date for coffee. I will follow up but resist the desire to know about them before I know them. I will wait, and listen, and hope that together we will hear what God is saying to us—offline, computers shut down, phones off the table.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Why I stopped Googling my parishioners."