

Knowledge is not enough

Patience, kindness, and love are far more valuable to the formation of our faith communities.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [June 2025](#) issue

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“Knowing is not enough; we must apply,” says Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. “Willing is not enough; we must do.” One thing pastors do are funerals. None of them is fun; all of them are important.

I was asked to officiate the funeral of a young man who lived in the streets, who rapped about the streets, and whose death I had seen on YouTube just hours earlier.

On this tragic occasion, people's framing felt familiar: *If only he knew*. His friends and family were saying it, other clergy were saying it, and indeed it felt like the right thing to say—like the only thing to say. *If only he knew his potential and how smart he was and how powerful his God was and how he was a child of that God. If only he knew*. The implication was that he chose the streets because he didn't know any better—an idea that guides curriculums and after-school programs across this country.

"If you know better, you do better," says everyone. That kind of framing works fine until you do a different kind of funeral. For me, it was the one where a woman died by suicide after suffering decades with mental illness. "If only she knew," right? How loved she was and that things turn around and all of that nonsense.

I call it nonsense not because it's absurd or untrue but because she did know: she left behind poems and journals, she went to therapy, she tried medication, she was surrounded by a loving family. She absolutely knew and articulated that knowledge in painful detail. What she knew, what it felt like, what it was called: it was all there. And she took her own life anyway.

There's a widely held presumption that knowledge is the light that will keep us away from all kinds of darkness and bad decisions. This and similar ideas are found in every religious tradition. Proverbs 2 reminds us that from God's mouth comes knowledge and understanding. We fight for it; we desperately want it for our kids. Knowledge is so powerful that this current iteration of our government is pulling out all the stops to control how or whether some people receive it at all. In politics, "if only they knew" often means "let's keep them from knowing."

But knowledge is not enough. It's true that in movement spaces, education is critical, and I wish James Lawson—the lead teacher of nonviolent resistance during the civil rights movement—were as highly regarded as Martin Luther King Jr. I wish teachers were paid more and treated better, because education is a key and has unlocked my life and probably yours too. But it isn't enough.

I was kind of surprised to discover a Goethe quote about knowledge not being enough. For one thing, I grew up thinking this was a Bruce Lee quote, as does probably more than half the internet. But also, it's Goethe—a supersmart German polymath who I assumed would privilege his own education above all else. But he doesn't. And neither does Jesus, another supersmart guy. There's wisdom in this.

As churches have gotten more involved in movements for social justice, a lot of that involvement has meant education: teaching congregants what's going on and how it impacts them. Some of the most viral videos on our current ills are of pastors taking the time to teach. There is a certain kind of capital given to those who, in Black Church parlance, break it down and make it plain for us, which means there is also a certain desire among clergy—regardless of race—to prove oneself smart.

I wonder why we lead with our intellect when it is clear that patience, kindness, and love are far more valuable to the formation of faith communities. I wonder why I started my first pastorate intent on showing them how smart I was and how much I knew. Maybe it's because, in this strange world we live in, knowledge brings credibility. Jesus, knowledgeable as he was, went about healing and shaping community—and here we are as his disciples, flexing our intellect. It's a strange habit that feels natural to us.

Because the main thing that seems to have increased alongside our access to knowledge is our sense of despair and dread. I'm not suggesting we stop learning and turn away. I am suggesting what Goethe and Bruce Lee said: knowledge is not enough. It must be paired with commitment and conviction—it must lead to action—or we will simply know more about who and what is keeping us from God's abundance.

Some of us have seen fit to lift the veil and show the monster's face. This is necessary! But what our kin in the streets or alone in their bedroom have shown us is that we must also do something about the monster, or it will continue to kill us. Seeing its face, understanding its contours, is not enough. How we apply knowledge, what tools we create and offer, what our communities and people do with what we know: this is what determines whether knowing makes any difference at all.

"Knowing is not enough; we must apply." So how do we apply our knowledge? It seems clear to me that we still don't know. I'll plan to explore the second half of Goethe's sentence in my next column.