

Confusion that inspires (John 10:1-10)

When Jesus' hearers don't understand him, is it because they are spiritual doofuses? Or is non-understanding part of Jesus' intent?

by [Amy Leach](#)

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“Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”

When I was teaching a college intro to literature class, early in the semester I would show my students two images: an advertisement for a car and a self-portrait by Van Gogh. I'd ask the 18 of them to write down what they thought the “message” of each one was. Invariably they'd all get the same message from the ad—and 18 disparate messages from the painting. It's the difference between propaganda and art: propaganda transmits one clear point, while art, if it's good, sustains countless interpretations. Van Gogh's portrait of himself is beautifully fugitive.

The Pharisees, disciples, and other listeners often don't understand what Jesus is talking about—sheep, gate, what, huh? I've been told that this is because they are doofuses, spiritually. I too have trouble understanding what Jesus is talking about, at times; no doubt I'm a spiritual doofus, but maybe, also, non-understanding is part of Jesus' intent, part of his art. For me it's a lure—it's those passages I can't quite catch that catch me, that I can't stop thinking about. Propaganda is clear, catchable, droppable.

In my house there is a Bible called *The Clear Word Bible* that clears up and simplifies all mysterious Bible passages. I never read it. It turns wine into water. (Also it turns the wine in Isaiah and John into grape juice, because the translator is a teetotaler.)

I suppose *The Clear Word Bible* is a more saleable title than *The Confusing Word Bible*, but I prefer the more confusing translations—because the confusion is truer to Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and life. Life is not very pinnable down, and mystery is an engine, driving us millions of miles past cliché. I've seen blockbusters I've forgotten as soon as I left the theater, but I think all the time about Tarkovsky's *Mirror*. I can't understand it, and I can't drop it, just as I can't drop *The Dead* by James Joyce.

“If you understand, it is not God,” wrote Augustine. When I think back on my religious education, the easy simplifications seem as valuable as Twinkies, while the strange words of Jesus and Job and Isaiah are measureless treasures: worlds behind those words. And when I am feeling dull, I just go out and get me an I-don't-know or two and feel my hallelujahs returning. I don't know why snow melts into puzzle pieces; I don't know where the word *teetotaler* comes from; I don't know how they made that crown for my tooth. As the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska said in her 1996 Nobel lecture, “Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous ‘I don't know.’”

