"The Art of Learning'"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
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How do you know what you know? The first time I heard this question, I thought it was utter nonsense. I mean...don't you just either know something or not know something? What does it mean to ask how I know what I know?

As it turns out, this question of how we know something is a whole area of philosophy known as epistemology—literally, the study of knowledge. As abstruse as that sounds, I believe that differing ideas about epistemology are at the root of many of today's divisions and conflicts in our nation and our world. Let me try to explain why I think so.

How do you know what you know? Do you simply look at an object and know what it is? How did you learn that this is a glass or that is a piano? How do you know that this is the color gray and this is the color teal—although admittedly teal is a tough color...what is it? 'blue' or 'green'?

Before I studied philosophy, answering such questions seemed pretty simple. I knew the names of objects and colors from my parents, from teachers, from books or after school specials on TV. These things simply were. And, more importantly, they could be proven as true by looking things up in an encyclopedia or asking a teacher or some other 'expert' I trusted. There was great comfort in knowing there were right and wrong answers that could be clearly identified.

Knowledge was objective and learning was the process of mastering what things were and how things worked. Of course, lots of people knew more than I did about different things. Doctors knew about how the body worked. Mechanics knew how cars worked. History teachers knew what had happened during the Revolutionary War or Ancient Rome.

But, what I did know, I was certain about. However, studying philosophy changed all of this. First there was the idea that our senses could not be entirely trusted. Look at an oar in the water, the philosophers coached, notice the distortion of the shape and size when seen through the water.

Or, notice how an object in low light or long distance looks like a crouched dog, but then you look again and it's a rock. Noticing such experiences makes us aware that the interaction between our senses and our brains is not a simple process of matching perceptions to a database of terms or concepts. Rather, as we notice the slippage in the process of perceiving, we recognize how there is a filter of interpretation between our seeing and our knowing. In other words, knowledge has a subjective component.

We each see the world a little differently because of the ways our particular mental filters shape our understanding. Maybe I'm losing some of you here?! Perhaps some of you are

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skeptical whether a lens of subjectivity means there is no objective knowledge, no absolute truths. And others may simply be wondering what the heck this sermon is about and why it matters to you and your life.

Here's why it matters: we are living in a divided world with a flood of information from multiple sources.

Each day as we go online, turn on the radio, read the paper, or talk with friends, family, or neighbors, we encounter a range of points of view. And, for all we encounter, there are so many more points of view that we rarely hear or consider. We are living within a cacophony of voices competing for our attention and for our assent that they are right. And, this storm of ideas and perspectives can leave us confused, exhausted, or numb.

I think we are living in the midst of an epistemological storm. Which is to say, the old frameworks about what we know and how we know it are no longer adequate. We need new frameworks to navigate a landscape of information fractured by multiple perspectives and points of view.

For many, this fracturing of a simple landscape of shared knowledge feels like an unwelcome destruction. It used to be easier. We all watched Dan Rather on the local nightly news and knew what was going on in the world. We all knew the importance of civility and supporting our neighbors. We all knew what to expect from our neighbors, our children, and ourselves when it came to hard work, gender roles, raising a family, or going to church.

At least, for some, it felt this simple. However, it was never this simple, this straightforward, this clear for others. For some, neither Dan Rather nor any broadcast news voiced their experience of what it felt like to be black in America, or silently gay, or painfully childless or intentionally single, or any number of other non-mainstream experiences. The seemingly simple, straightforward, "commonsense" knowledge has never been the whole story.

Studying epistemology taught me to raise critical questions about what I thought I knew...and to consider how my knowledge might not be as complete or objective as I thought it was. Such questions can shift how we relate to the flood of information and points of view we encounter every day. We shift from simply trying to learn what things are and how they work to also asking who is telling us this information and for what purpose. We shift to asking where people are coming from with their point of view.

Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins writes: "Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge." In other words, whatever we experience and think to be absolutely, obviously True...is only part of the picture. I believe that this insight, this honest recognition of the limits of our understanding, can change how we approach the art of learning.

Our knowledge is partial and situated, argues Hill Collins, because we live within "a matrix of domination"—by which she simply means that multiple social dynamics of race,

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economic resources, gender, sexuality, and more intersect with each other to tell us that some groups are more important, more powerful than others. These social dynamics mean that we experience different challenges and opportunities depending on our gender identity, the color of our skin, the religion of our family, and so on. These differences also shape how and what we learn about ourselves and the world.

Hill Collins describes these differences as a kind of situated knowledge—knowledge that comes from particular contexts and experiences. She insists that what we know emerges from where we stand within this matrix, this intersecting web of social dynamics. And, most importantly, she insists that no one ever stands outside of this complex social system when they learn. We are always learning and gaining knowledge about ourselves and the world from a place within the social system, from within the matrix of domination. For this reason, no one has access to the full picture.

This idea that our knowledge is always shaped by where we stand within our society can profoundly change our sense of self in the world. The idea that knowledge is situated within social context means that our perspectives are always partial. We're only ever seeing the world from where we stand.

When we see our knowledge as only ever partial, this turns learning into a process of navigating a living mosaic of information and perspectives. This fragmented partiality can be a terrifying place to be as the certainty of absolute knowledge rapidly dims. Certainty in the capital T truth can be enormously comforting for those in search of answers about how things work in the world and how one should live one's life.

Indeed, in the cacophony of today's media streams of information, there is a lot of absolute certainty that competes for our attention. Attempting to mentally and morally referee who or what is right can be an endless dive into a stream of who says what, the newest study, and on and on. Whether we're trying to find certainty about the best plan for weight loss, improving your memory, having a happier marriage, or fixing problems in our country like immigration, economic inequality, domestic violence, or racism, there are a multitude of certain voices telling us the 'right' answer and, perhaps more often, the absolutely 'wrong' answer.

But does letting go of absolute certainty mean a collapse into a relativity where all points of view are equal? Does it mean we have no place from which to proffer critique of another point of view or to lobby for our own point of view as better? Does it mean we are doomed to forever be adrift in an ocean of opinions without any sense of moral direction or purpose?

Patricia Hill Collins and her black feminist epistemology say no. She argues that there is a third way between absolute truth and moral relativity. The third way is to see all knowledge as situated and partial. We can each be aware that we speak from of our own standpoint, of our own social location. And, we can each be aware that others hold pieces of knowledge that we do not know.

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Aware of our limits of knowledge, we can more intentionally wonder do we not know about the privileges or penalties of belonging to a particular racial or class or other social group? What do we not know about being male or female or transgender? What do we not know about being black or white or Hispanic? What do we not know about being an immigrant, a refugee, undocumented?

In multiple ways, each of our lives are full of knowing and not knowing. The overflowing abundance of knowledge and information available to us means that learning is no longer about mastering a body of knowledge, but choosing what we will intentionally pay attention to as we seek understanding. We become curators of knowledge sifting through information and sorting out what to engage more deeply and what to dismiss.

But as curators, it is important to be aware that we already bring to this art of learning an interpretive lens and our partial knowledge. Being aware of this subjective and partial nature of knowing can challenge us to critically question how we know what we know and to seek out deeper understandings of what we do not know.

The art of learning becomes an engaged process of curating information to shape a rich and varied, if never complete, understanding of the world. We will never understand or know everything in this age of Mass Media. Since information is so readily available, our task for learning becomes instead about how we learn. We must choose how we access information—from what sources and through what mediums—books, Ted Talks on YouTube, Radio shows, personal conversations, or more. We must choose the topics into which we will invest our time and precious mental space. We must choose whether to explore how our standpoint affects what we know and what we do not know.

As a process of curation, our learning never ends. While this may not seem to solve the problem of the ceaseless flow of information we face in an age of Mass Media, it does help by reminding us that our task is not to know it all. And this gets us back to the epistemological storm beneath the divisions and conflicts.

In the cacophony of voices, I hear many claiming to know the Truth, the total picture, the complete understanding. Such a posture of certainty leaves little room for anything but a debate about who is right and who is wrong. However, if we shift our epistemological framework to hear each voice as partial and situated, we begin to ask different questions. We wonder why a person holds a particular point of view—what is shaping their understanding, what sources of knowledge are they pointing to, what is it that they do not know?

And we can ask the same questions of ourselves. Speaking from our own standpoint, even as we try to understand another's point of view, keeps the conversation open and expanding, rather than combative and limited to only two options: right and wrong.

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As Unitarian Universalists, we are rooted in a long tradition of seeking understanding. By not proclaiming the Truth, we intentionally try to create a community in which we are all always engaged in the art of learning.

While this means we may never know everything, it does allow us to remain open and curious about ourselves, other people, and our world. It allows us to become curators rather than masters of knowledge. It allows us to be ok with not knowing, with being limited and situated in our knowledge, and understanding that others are also. It allows us, as we say in our covenant each week, to be together with an open mind. And in this posture of an open mind, may we all find joy in exploring the art of learning.

So may it be.

Amen.

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