The Gift of Being Yourself - Book Review

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Chapter 1: Transformational Knowing of Self and God

Deep knowing of God and deep knowing of self is one of the most important things of one’s existence and well-being. Knowing God and knowing self are interdependent, but in reality, people tend to focus more on knowing God and ignore knowing themselves, and the consequences are often grievous – damages in many people’s lives. Focusing on God while failing to know one’s self deeply is an external form of piety, it is a lie from the soil of self-ignorance, and it is not worthy of being called transformational knowing. Transformational knowledge involves knowing of, not merely knowing about; it grows out of a relationship to the object that is known – whether this is God or one’s self. People need to come to know God not by looking at God exclusively, but by looking at God then looking at themselves – then looking at God, and then again looking at themselves; both God and self are most fully known in relationship with each other (Benner, 2004).

Reflection. Guilt, this is probably one of the words that came to my mind and heart after reading Benner’s first chapter. Do not get me wrong, I am a person with faith and I love God, but Benner was right, I think I settled myself easily for knowing about God. Not being fully aware of the situation, I did not allow my initial introduction to deepen into a deep, intimate knowing of Him (Benner, 2004, p. 30). I easily settled myself in the security of my boat and denied the invitation to be vulnerable in front of Him (Benner, 2004, p. 31). There are many “I thought” in my mind right now. I thought my relationship with Him is perfect enough; I thought I already have enough understanding of God’s existence, I thought….I know this is not too late. I am ready to move my objective knowledge to personal knowing and beyond. I am ready to
know more of myself and move my relationship with Him, deeply and intimately. This is one of my vocations.

Chapter II: Knowing God

There is no simple formula for deep knowing of God. Knowing becomes increasingly complex as people move from knowing objects to knowing people and from knowing people to knowing God, but the good news is, God can be known by human being-personally and experientially, no matter how complex it is. Even a little knowledge of God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge about Him. What God longs for is not just the first encounter; He wants an ongoing relationship with His people. To do this and to know Him deeply, it is a must to spend time with Jesus and to meet Jesus by means of Spirit-guided meditation on the Gospels (Benner, 2004).

Reflection. Benner (2004) was right, “There is no simple formula for deep knowing of God” (p. 45). It is complex but hopeful. What do I mean by that? Complex but hopeful – it is easy for me to say, “I know God,” but the complexity is, how deeply do I know Him? It is hopeful, because I know and love Jesus; and Jesus is my first step of knowing the Lord deeply. To know Jesus, therefore, is to know God (John 14:9). He is the filter that I need to know more about God as I move from knowing about God to meeting God personally in Jesus (Benner, 2004, p. 36). It may sound complicated in many situations, it maybe difficult to understand, but I know if I spend more time with Jesus through meditations and honest, prayerful reflection, that first step will definitely move me forward closer to our God. With God, the complexity and difficulty of the situation will be just plain and simple.
Chapter III: First Steps Toward Knowing Yourself

According to Thomas Merton, “To be unknown by God is altogether too much privacy” (as cited in Benner, 2004, p. 47). Knowing one’s self deeply must begin by knowing the self that is known by God. Genuine self-knowledge begins by looking at God and understanding that He loves His people with a passionate absorbed interest. God’s love must be the basis of one’s self-identity. An identity grounded in God, whole not broken, not unknown and not wounded; an identity known and deeply loved by God (Benner, 2004).

Reflection. “Hi, my name is Liza Santos, Budget Manager for XYZ Company” - this is how I usually introduced myself to my colleagues; introduction that resorts to the most common social practice of professional designation. I am pretty sure, this is the general practice for everyone else. Most of the time, we based our identity on what we do, not for who we are (Benner, 2004, p. 50).

Getting to know one’s self is somewhat complicated. Most of the times, we are oblivious of our own identity. We know ourselves as a single, unified self, and we are not aware of the existence of our part-selves (Benner, 2004, p. 53). We are not aware because we chose not to be aware and we ignored many important aspects of our lives that were essential to reveal our real identity. Christian spirituality involves acknowledging all our part-selves, exposing them to God’s love and letting Him weave them into the new person He is making (Benner, 2004, p. 54). To know ourselves better, we need to expose ourselves fully to God, we should not be afraid because God accepted us yesterday, and He will accept us today and tomorrow—fully and unconditionally.
Chapter IV: Knowing Yourself as You Really Are

A complete knowing of one’s self in relation to God includes knowing three things: one’s self as deeply loved, one’s self as deeply sinful, and one’s self as in a process of being redeemed and restored. This chapter focuses in knowing one’s self as a sinner, Benner reiterated that mankind is not just a simply sinner, but a deeply loved sinner. Discovering core sin tendencies is helpful to really know one’s self because it let the person’s deal with problems at their root. It helps the illusion to go away if the person learns to see and accept what is really there. Genuinely knowing one’s self involves the purification of sight; it involves genuine desire, prayer, and the courage to meet God in solitude (Benner, 2004).

**Reflection.** One of the hardest realizations in this chapter is the idea that I can only know myself better by looking at my sins behind my sins. It is quite frightening to face God because I am scared to strip away from illusions and face the reality (Benner, 2004, p. 63). A reality that sin is who we are and to be human is to be a sinner (p. 65). I am scared because I am a sinner. I get angry, I get jealous, and I have pride, etc. This is an unpleasant truth but this is the reality. To know myself better, I have to accept what is really there. I am not proud I committed those sins, but I know God loves me no matter what. My vocation is to be vulnerable in front of him, to spend more time with Him in solitude, and to follow my heart desires to serve the Lord.

Chapter IV: Unmasking Your False Self

False self is built on an inordinate attachment to an image of one’s self that makes one person special. The core of the false self is the desire to preserve the image of one’s self and a way relating to the world. False self is something the person learns from the experience to hide and pretend. A person with false self knows how to present itself in the best possible light – a light designed to create a favorable impression and self-esteem. The only hope for unmasking
the falsity is a radical encounter with truth and only the Spirit of Truth can save someone from the consequences of having listened to the serpent rather than God (Benner, 2004, pp. 75-89).

**Reflection.** Seven years ago, I moved to California from the Philippines all by myself. Away from my family and friends, I learned to be independent and brave - I pretended to be brave. During the first year, I learned to walk naked into the land of uncertainties (Quinn, 1996, p. 3). I called it land of uncertainties because of the new culture, new environment, new friends, and new work. I was on my false self because I pretended I knew everything. I learned to present myself in the best possible light – a light designed to create a favorable impression (Benner, 2004, p. 78). Being just myself here taught me to be brave, I taught myself not to entertain any negative thoughts, and I taught myself to be independent. During the first year of my uncertainties, only one thing remained certain – God did not leave me, and He guided me during my falsity. He was the Spirit of Truth that saved me from my pretentions and [uncertainties] (Benner, 2004, p. 79).

**Chapter VI: Becoming Your True Self**

The true self is who, in reality, is the total self created by God. True self is the image of God, the unique face of God that has been set aside from eternity to one’s self. The discovery of true self does not simply produce freedom but it also generates vocation. Vocation is the calling towards a purpose of being that is grounded in God rather than in own self. Everyone’s calling is to become the true self and to serve God and fellow human beings that will represent the fulfillment of true self; true self is not simply a possession, it is a calling (Benner, 2004).

**Reflection.** Growing-up in a third-world country, I would say I am one of those kids who experienced an average way of life. I only received toys during Christmas or birthdays and very rare that my family went out in a restaurant for a fancy meal, but nevertheless, I was happy
and grateful. My early life opened and led me to find my truest self, identity, and vocation. As I mentioned earlier, I moved to the United States seven-years ago with the hope of helping my family and to establish my career and myself. My family did not ask for any help but I know God brought me to this place for a reason. My aging parents never experienced an easy life before. They worked so hard to give us decent meal and good education. I know God has called me to take care of my parents and my family; this responsibility sounds overwhelming and big, but I am not scared. My life is way better than before; God gave me all these opportunities in life to be successful and blessed. I know this is one of my callings, to help and support my family, because I can and I want to. Our vocation is always a response to Divine call to take our place in the kingdom of God. My vocation is a call to serve God and my [family] in the distinctive way that fits the shape of my being (Benner, 2004, p. 97).

**Conclusion**

This book has brought me to the next level of understanding of my true self. It opened so many questions and realizations in my life, and this also brought me a clear understanding of my relationship with God. Some chapters are very easy to understand but there are few that really challenged my belief and disposition. To admit that I am a sinner is difficult but to unmask my true self is the hardest. I applaud Benner for digging different aspects of our life that most of the times are difficult for us to face and realize. Step by step, I know I am getting closer to my truest vocation in this world, I know I will get there soon.
References
