

Ignorance—Journaling Exercise

“A man’s ignorance sometimes is not only useful but beautiful, - while his knowledge, so called, is oftentimes worse than useless, besides being ugly. Which is the best man to deal with, - he who knows nothing about a subject, and, what is extremely rare, knows that he knows nothing, or he who really knows something about it, but thinks that he knows all?”

Henry David Thoreau--“Walking”

Journal Prompt: What are your initial reactions to the word “ignorance”? Does that reaction fit with Thoreau’s reaction to ignorance in this quotation? What does it mean to be an “expert” on something? Is it possible for someone to know everything there is to know about a particular topic? Do you think most people know what they don’t know? Can you remember a time when something you believed strongly was reputed or proven to be wrong? How did that impact your understanding of what it means to “know” something? How can our firm belief that we “know” something be “useless” or “ugly,” as Thoreau suggests?

Follow-up (or preparation) activity: Identify something about which you believe you possess great knowledge (cars, music, the Civil War, French cooking – anything!). Briefly describe what you know about the subject. Go on the internet; visit the library; talk with your neighbors, parents or friends; and read up about or investigate your subject. Find something which you’ve always taken as a fact but which your new research proved to be incorrect or at least partially incomplete. Identify some completely new information you learned about this topic, about which you had no previous awareness.

Do you think you would ever be able to know “everything” there is to know about this topic?



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