

Afterword: *Longing to Know* Turns 20

It is no small thing for a book to endure. Twenty years is worth celebrating, according to Ryan Holiday, author of *Perennial Seller*. In honor of *Longing to Know*'s 2023 milestone, I append this fresh afterword to the audio version.

Let me tell you the book's story from twenty years out. And also why I believe *LTK*'s message remains, as Holiday says, both timeless and current.¹

In the spring of 2000, I had my first chance to teach a course which aired my thoughts about knowing—ideas which had been coalescing gradually over some decades. The class brimmed with brilliant students who “got it” and joyously dived in. I remember one asking at the end: “Will you please write this in a book?” (I was sure that I couldn't.)

But only a month later, a way forward presented itself. It came from book editor Steve Bond. *LTK*'s birth and existence is indebted to Steve: he coached me stage by stage to the manuscript. Grievously, his own publishing house opted not to publish it; it remains to me to honor him for being the womb which brought this book baby to term.

Other publisher rejections followed. They featured glowing praise, and then a humble admission that it was difficult to sell books “in the cracks” between academic and popular. I was rather proud of the designation.

I reached out to “ontological” bookseller, Byron Berger.² “When you think of ‘books in the cracks,’ what publisher comes to mind?” I asked. Without pausing, he replied: “Send your manuscript to Rodney Clapp, and tell him I told you to send it.”

I did. I sent the whole manuscript to editor Rodney Clapp. (This is never done.)

A formal letter on publisher stationery arrived. It began: “Upon finishing a close read of your manuscript for *Longing to Know*, let me begin this letter with the highest compliment an editor can offer an author: When are you starting on your *next* book, and can I publish it *also*?”

I sank weakly into a chair. The letter continued: “There are many attractive things about your work. The tone, not least of all, is terribly attractive—there are signs throughout of the author as a caring, smart, wry, trustworthy person.”

(“I'm WRY!” I laughed shakily as I read on.)

¹ Ryan Holiday, *Perennial Seller: The Art of Making and Marketing Work that Lasts* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

² Drawing the famous phrase from Anselm's Ontological Argument for the Existence of God, Byron is that bookseller “than which no greater can be conceived.” www.heartsandmindsbooks.com.

“You clearly know your philosophy, and pass with flying colors the test (sometimes overstated) that anyone who really knows a subject can communicate it simply. You are at once down to earth and exciting to thought and faith. Your ability to link driving, your rickety car, family life, and so forth, with some of the hardest-to-grasp aspects of philosophy and theology is outstanding. And I can’t say enough about your apt employment of apt, exactly fitting examples.”

(I fell in love with the word, *apt*—itself requiring the subsidiary awareness of *LTK*’s healthy epistemology.)

“You really have written a wonderfully readable, accessible book on epistemology,” the letter finished. Of course, several pages of editorial changes followed. Nevertheless! Rodney Clapp the in-the-cracks book editor had spoken!

Longing to Know was born in July 2003. For readers of *Loving to Know*, that was the summer that the little cedar waxwing, Bandit, spent on my shoulder.³ Bandit saw my face, as I tell in that story. And as it came about, soon others did as well. In *LTK* I was heard and seen in a fresh way. People began to listen to what had been in my head.

In those early months of *LTK* I remember feeling as if the air was crackling around me, as it does just before a lightning strike. The book itself was pregnant with possibilities—indeterminate future manifestations.⁴ Out of *LTK* began to grow the promised manifestations.

Longing to Know proved personally and professionally life changing. It birthed me as an author. Though this has never proved as glamorous or as famous or as easy as I naively imagined, it is what I feel I am and have always wanted to be.

Very early on, a business consultant read *LTK* and offered his services to help me develop the business seminar that he was convinced that it contained. I piloted “Epistemology for the Workplace,” a business seminar. This fueled “*LTK* and . . .”: my growing collection of arenas of life in which this approach to knowing pertains and holds value. Other ones early on: surgery, singing, record producing, and FBI investigation. And of course, knowing God. My passion persists to bring this message into every arena of life and work.⁵

But *Longing to Know* was also birthing me as an academic. An interview with Ken Myers on *Mars Hill Audio* led to Geneva College hiring me as philosophy professor.⁶ I had never yet held a fulltime academic post. So I had imagined this impossible, even though it was the job I had trained for. My other initial schemes gave way to this. The hire would make “an honest woman” of me: I would now be fully credentialed.

³ “Introduction,” *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011)

⁴ *LTK*, chap. 16.

⁵ This mission continues now in the book series, *Doorways*, on which I have embarked. Also see the LM “Symposium” on the website, www.estherlightcapmeek.com.

⁶ Ken Myers, www.marshillaudio.org.

At Geneva College I regularly taught the book in a course called “Christian Understanding of Life.” Out of that has come abundant fruit. In 2011, after several summers’ work, it produced *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology*—which was the course itself in a book. In 2014 came the slimmer version, *A Little Manual for Knowing*. Most importantly, out of that course came students whom I saw transformed, restored to joyful skill in the knowing venture.

For a class assignment, each student produced a “covenant epistemology project”: a knowing venture, in any field, which they would undergo, identifying therein telltale “covenant epistemology features.” Students’ end-of-semester presentations made the case for covenant epistemology while binding us together in joyous camaraderie and friendship. Raising butterflies from caterpillars, pottery, volleyball, hunting, ballroom dancing, crochet, blacksmithing, flight instruction, career discernment, writing poetry, learning an instrument or a painting technique . . . I could go on. Over the years the list of projects became endless.

Two productions remain especially memorable. First, a glow in the dark galaxy secretly painted on my classroom ceiling! (The project concerned pedagogy; I memorialize that galaxy on the cover of *Contact With Reality*.) And second, an Indie Rock album entitled, *Esther*, which stories three students’ epistemic crises and healing. In this *LTK* Turns 20 celebration, I continue to work with the galactic Andrew Calvetti, now a film maker, and with Shy Birds band producer Sean Dekonty, who has recorded me reading my audiobooks in his studio, amidst a tangle of drums, keyboards, guitars, and all manner of audio equipment.

As a reader of *LTK*, you also are its fruit. You *are* one of those indeterminate future prospects! You belong in this unfolding story. I look forward with delight to what transpires in and through you. *Longing to Know’s* most important result is people whose lives have been changed through its “epistemological therapy.”

Longing to Know’s stories are dated. The book’s own possibilities promptly moved me from St. Louis to the Pittsburgh region. (I still root for the Cards—*after* rooting for the Bucs.) There have been family changes, and auto changes. But auto mechanic Jeff Dare’s business thrives as Greentree Tire and Auto in Kirkwood, Missouri; he cares for my St. Louis family’s cars, and he advises me from afar. Distressingly, there have been other copperheads in my life, including under my front steps! *LTK’s* stories of knowing continue to ring true to our daily lives.

To write a book is to expose yourself; it showcases your own mistakes and flaws. There are typos I would like to fix: Plato’s dates should read 427-348 or thereabouts.⁷ In the film, the Red October’s Ramius is a captain, not a lieutenant.⁸ In one set of end-of-chapter discussion questions, an entry accidentally obtrudes from the previous chapter.⁹

⁷ *LTK*, 28.

⁸ *LTK*, 169.

⁹ *LTK*, 89.

To write a book is to leave a record of what you were thinking at the time, to mark your “Ebenezer”: thus far hath the Lord helped us.¹⁰ I hope that I have matured in person and thought. I have gently revised my understanding of things postmodern, for example, thanks to teaching (and thus learning) at Geneva College. But the approach to knowing which this book offers actually softens the impact of such flaws in submission to a farther real.¹¹ Just as you can still read a misspelled word as you subsidiarily indwell a text, readers and students in their own responsible pattern-shaping agency look from the author/teacher’s flawed presentation and break through to insight. *LTK*’s structure of knowing is *irenic*—peaceable. And a great relief.

Reflecting on all my books so far, *Longing to Know* continues to stand out as an entrée to my work. All my books present knowing’s essential structure of subsidiary focal integration. But *LTK* dwells on it extensively and plays it out in our daily lives, guiding readers into the skill of knowing.

Longing to Know’s message remains critically necessary two decades on from its birth. It is perennially true that we human persons are born philosophical: we live the “big hairy questions” of who we are, what is real, how we understand it and act toward it, with every step we take, through all the dimensions of our lives. With our philosophical birthright lying as it does at the core of who we are, we need philosophical nourishment. And we need that nourishment written *for all of us*, in our everyday lives.

Further, people’s need for epistemic healing endures as the Modern West’s implicit, skewed, damaging, presumptions about knowing only grow more strident. They adversely impact every arena of life and work. Throughout our lives we need help even recognizing the problem. We need help to diagnose the disease. But then we need a positive alternative true to who we are as human persons, one which restores us. I believe *LTK* offers this fresh but enduring understanding of how we know.

Longing to Know is written especially for people considering Christianity who have questions about knowing—about truth, doubt, certainty, and faith. “People considering Christianity” includes all Christian believers, as well as yet-to-be-believers. It includes everyone. Considering what is true and real calls for people to work out some things about knowing. I wrote *LTK* to deal with my own urgent questions about knowing in considering Christianity. Over the years, letters have arrived from Christian believers struggling with the same epistemological issues and deeply grateful for the help. Considering Christianity is a perennial concern. There are new versions of this concern two decades on, but *LTK*’s approach to knowing continues to address them.

I wrote the book also to take up the gauntlet which missiologist Lesslie Newbigin had thrown down: In the Modern West, he wrote, something is stopping the ears of people so that they cannot even hear the Good News of Jesus Christ. That earstopper is . . . epistemology. We must

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 7:12.

¹¹ *LTK*, chap. 20.

begin our witness here.¹² In fact, the Christian church itself needs epistemological therapy first. Modernist epistemology has domesticated the church, writes David Kettle, in a “winter of Western Christianity.”¹³ Both authors urgently commend the specific approach to knowing which *LTK* offers.

After twenty years, the message of *Longing to Know* is one I remain committed to share as widely as I am able. I believe that it matters deeply throughout our world. My task endures. So I’m glad the book is enduring also.

As part of *LTK*’s twenty-year anniversary, I spoke again with Michael Gordon, who lent the book his story. Michael and his friend Jon Dunning were students in that seminal class in 2000.¹⁴ In the succeeding months as I was writing, these two were reading the draft, making commenting and encouraging me. Both now continue to work in Christian ministry with college students.

Looking back, Michael relates: “God really was kind to put you in my path at just that time! It’s not hyperbolic to say it was faith saving.”

“Twenty years out, I’m still living out the implications of *Longing to Know*,” Michael continues. “It redefined the categories for me: a shift from a tyrannical quest for certainty into a freeing comfortableness with confidence. This is still very much the place that I live from. I’ve seen a lot of people walk away from the faith, and I certainly understand some of those challenges. It’s not like I’ve stopped wrestling with big questions or haven’t lived through other seasons of doubt. But the epistemological questions have been largely satisfied through the framework of *Longing to Know* in a way that has been deeply helpful and comforting.”

I asked Michael for his thoughts about the book’s longevity. “*Longing to Know* is even more timely now. The questions that students wrestle with, epistemologically, culturally, have only become more pronounced. But where for me the issue I needed help with was freedom from the tyranny of certainty, it’s the other side of the book’s paradigm that’s super helpful now: in knowing, there is a reality that we actually come into contact with. The book remains significant and relevant for the questions that people live from.”

As *LTK* turns twenty, I invite you to celebrate with me. Thank you for reading it. For rereading it. For sharing it with others. May *Longing to Know* bear fruit for at least twenty more years—in your life and beyond.

And if this is your first reading, by book’s end may you find yourself, in the words which end rock album *Esther*:

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

¹³ David J. Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context: Towards the Conversion of the West* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

¹⁴ *LTK*, 10, chaps. 2 and 24.

On this plateau, tired but ready to take flight; perched on the cedar, wings spread, eyes
fixed on the sunrise . . .¹⁵

Steubenville, Ohio
Advent, 2022

¹⁵ Sean DeKonty and Zack Bowman, *Esther: The Album*. Shy Birds Band, 2020. From the canary's point of view, having escaped out of the mine. Lyrics preceding this last line: from "Esther": "I want to believe/In something unseen/Transcendence engrained/In everyday things//I want to believe/In something unseen/Connections between/The real world and me." Twenty years later, this cry echoes Michael's in Chapter 2. And from "Copperhead": "I saw it when you pointed, the copper headed snake/its camouflage had failed him motionless, lying in wait/a world of possibilities, flashed before my eyes/the snake's more than its body, it's a danger, it's alive/the thought that followed, graced me/it's transitive, I thought/if the warning signs are evidence, who can say that beauty's not/expanding from the physical is more than is defined,/words alone cannot express the depth of all the things we find." Thanks again to Sean for recording *LTK* and this *Afterword*.