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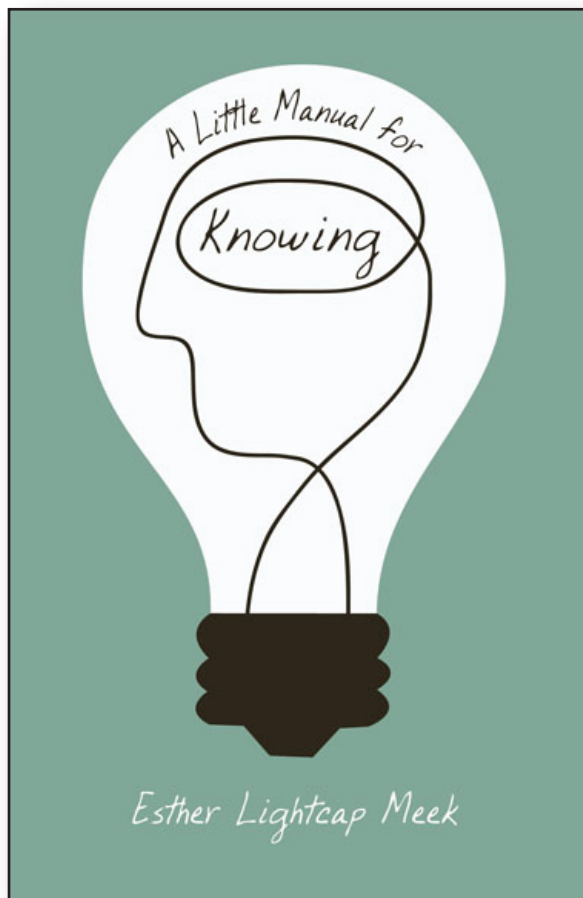
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In refreshing challenge to the common presumption that knowing involves amassing information, this book offers an eight-step approach that begins with love and pledge and ends with communion and shalom. Everyday adventures of knowing turn on a moment of insight that transforms and connects knower and known. No matter the field—science or art, business or theology, counseling or athletics—this little manual offers a how-to for knowing ventures. It offers concrete guidance to individuals or teams, students or professionals, along with plenty of exercises to spark the process of discovery, design, artistry, or mission.

A Little Manual for Knowing

Esther Lightcap Meek



“Readers of this *Little Manual for Knowing* are embarking on an adventure that may make a decisive difference in their learning and in all of their lives.”

Gideon Strauss

Executive Director, Max De Pree Center for Leadership, Fuller Theological Seminary

“*A Little Manual for Knowing*—essential reading for every university, every business, every church, and every home.”

Makoto Fujimura
Artist

“This brilliant little manual captures the depth and simplicity of Esther Meek’s work and invites the reader to apply wisdom to real-life complexities and problems.”

Dan B. Allender

Professor of Counseling Psychology and Founding President, The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology

“Esther Meek distills deep wisdom with a care scholarly and pastoral at once. Any who wish to see the world more truly will be grateful for her illuminating intervention.”

Eric Miller

Professor of American History, Geneva College, and award-winning author of *Hope in a Scattering Time: A Life of Christopher Lasch*

“With this pearl of great value, Esther Meek lovingly and confidently shepherds us on a pilgrimage, a reconsidering and recovery of what it means to know. For those who commit to the journey, the hoped-for gifts await.”

Bruce A. Vojak

Associate Dean of Engineering, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and author of *Serial Innovators*

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“In a conversation some years ago, Esther Meek suggested to me that our first knowledge as human beings is the knowledge of being loved—in the wombs, at the breast, and in the embraces of our mothers. This first knowledge, she suggested, is paradigmatic for all of our knowing. To know follows being known; being known is woven into being loved. This suggestion has, ever since, been shaping my epistemology as a scholar, but more deeply, my understanding of my knowing as a human being in all of life. Readers of this *A Little Manual for Knowing* are embarking on an adventure that may, similarly, make a decisive difference in their learning and in all of their lives.”

—GIDEON STRAUSS

Executive Director, Max De Pree Center for Leadership,
Fuller Theological Seminary

“With this pearl of great value, Esther Meek lovingly and confidently shepherds us on a pilgrimage, a reconsidering and recovery of what it means to know. Her *A Little Manual* not only is about epistemology; indwelling it—reading the text and reflecting on its exercises—is to practice and experience epistemology. For those who commit to the journey, the hoped for gifts await.”

—BRUCE A. VOJAK

Associate Dean of Engineering, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

“When I read anything Esther Meek writes I find myself with holy envy longing to be a wiser man. This brilliant little manual captures the depth and simplicity of her work and invites the reader to apply wisdom to real life complexities and problems. Esther’s wisdom is immense, playful, and heart transforming. This manual will inform, enlighten, and free you to know how to know in new ways that will transform your heart.”

—DAN B. ALLENDER

Professor of Counseling Psychology and Founding President, The Seattle
School of Theology and Psychology

“If I were asked to choose one key curriculum to be taught in a freshman class of any liberal arts university, it would be Esther Meek’s class on epistemology. If I were asked to choose one book, it would be *A Little Manual for Knowing*. At (the) Fujimura home we choose one book each summer to read together and discuss with our grown children. This year it will be *A Little Manual for Knowing*—essential reading for every university, every business, every church, and every home.”


—MAKOTO FUJIMURA

artist

A LITTLE MANUAL
FOR KNOWING

A Little Manual for
KNOWING

Esther Lightcap Meek

 CASCADe *Books* • Eugene, Oregon

A LITTLE MANUAL FOR KNOWING

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Manufactured in the U.S.A.

For my family:
Starr and Alex, Stacey and Evan, Steph and Garrett,
and the budding generation

And for Dr. Robert M. Frazier,
colleague and friend

With wonder and gratitude

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Introduction

THIS IS A LITTLE book about knowing. It is meant especially for a person, or team of persons, starting out on a knowing venture. That venture could be college. It could be starting or joining a business. It could be creating art, doing scientific research, or designing a bridge. It could be cooking or playing sports. It could be starting a relationship with a person or with a place. It could be self-discovery. It could be a relationship with God, or ministry in a church team. These are everyday adventures. They can be once-in-a-lifetime quests. This *Little Manual* will help all such ventures.

Epistemology: concrete ideas about knowledge and knowing

We're involved in knowing all the time in all corners of our lives. Even so, we tend not to think about knowing *itself*. We don't—unless a puzzle arises. Beginning a venture is just such a puzzle. How do we come to know? Whose guidance do we trust? How do we know we are getting it right about the situation? About ourselves? How, after all, does knowing work? Apart from some savvy about these things, the success of our venture is in jeopardy. This *Little Manual* is about how knowing works.

How we know is actually a philosophical question. It is what epistemology, one of the major areas of philosophy, is all about. Philosophy concerns the profoundest wonders of our lives as humans. It concerns life's shaping questions: What is really real? (metaphysics or ontology). How do I know it? (epistemology).

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What is right and good? (metaethics and axiology). What does it mean to be human? (philosophical anthropology). Our entire lives sail on the breast of these deep, wonder-full questions. They are not the sort of questions we can solve by doing a science experiment. We slowly gain insight into them as we live our lives and continually reflect on our living. Philosophy accompanies the trajectory of our growing to understand what it means to be human, a trajectory from wonder to wisdom that never leaves the wonder behind.

Our common, tacit, epistemic orientation

Many people don't think much about how we know because we take it for granted. But we tacitly presume some things about knowing. We tend to think knowledge is information, facts, bits of data, "content," true statements—true statements justified by other true statements. And while this isn't exactly false, we tend to have a vision of knowledge as being *only* this. We conclude that gaining knowledge is collecting information—and we're done—educated, trained, expert, certain.

This is a philosophical orientation, an unexamined one. It has a lot of appeal, because it is quantifiable, measurable, assessable, and commodifiable. It offers control and power. But we'll see that the knowledge-as-information vision is actually defective and damaging. It distorts reality and humanness, and it gets in the way of good knowing.

If knowledge is information, and either we have it or we don't, how can we come to know in the first place? What does discovery involve? Or learning? Or insight? Or the creative act? How do we get going on a knowing venture?

Along with this knowledge-as-information approach, we tend to be "epistemological dualists." We distinguish knowledge from belief, facts from values, reason from faith, theory from application, thought from emotion, mind from body, objective from subjective, science from art. We readily overlay the first members of each pair—knowledge, facts, reason, theory, mind, objectivity, and science. And

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we set each first member over against its “opposite.” We think we need to keep knowledge “pure” from these “opposites.”

For example, we believe that we should keep ourselves and our passion out of knowledge if we are to be objective. So we actually cut off knowledge from ourselves, the knowers. As a result, we can be bored or indifferent about knowledge.

Here’s another example: we think that knowledge is information or theory, and that application and action is something else—and thus, not knowledge. We can think that knowledge actually has little to do with real life. Maybe knowledge doesn’t matter anyway.

We know there is something called wisdom. But how wisdom connects with knowledge—what wisdom even is, and how it may be had—we have no idea.

Epistemological dualism cuts us as knowers down into disconnected compartments unable to work together—information here, body there, emotions in a third place. It depersonalizes us at the moment of one of our greatest opportunities for personhood—coming to know. It dispels any sense of adventure.

Another sort of distinction we can find ourselves making is between knowledge and reality—the known. We may think that we can be sure of data, but we cannot be sure of what is really the case. Knowledge is just convenient summaries of data.

And then we can move on to think that “knowledge” is just what we take it to be, because knowing—understanding the world—isn’t even possible. We can even think that what we call “knowledge” is really about power and convention and what works. We can think that truth is ours to determine.

Disconnecting knowing from knower and known is not a helpful mindset for starting a knowing venture. It dismissively suspects the thing we want to come to know. It doesn’t give us confidence or savvy about the venture. It offers zero strategy for moving from zero to sixty in coming to understand anything at all.

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Reorienting our epistemic stance

These last paragraphs are packed with mystifying thoughts and questions. But they make a few things clear. First, people do have plenty of ideas about knowledge and knowing. Second, those ideas are, by definition, epistemology. We are philosophical beings whether or not we have had a class in philosophy. In fact, we live out an orientation to knowing. Third, these ideas about knowledge can be expected to affect our knowing. Fourth, thinking of knowledge as information is an epistemic stance that does not help make sense of knowing ventures. We may need epistemological therapy.

We are epistemological beings: we live out an orientation to knowing, whether we “know” it or not. And that orientation probably needs some therapy. This *Little Manual* will help you reorient your tacitly presumed epistemology to something more effective and human.

People tend to think that philosophy is abstract and impractical. That’s because it takes effort to probe these things. There aren’t pat answers. It takes personal risk. But in fact, philosophy is concrete and powerfully practical. If you don’t fix it, it will put you and your world and your venture in a fix. If you do fix it, it will open the world to you. It will make you far better at your venture and at your life. That is the promise of this *Little Manual*.

Proposing covenant epistemology

In my own journey of puzzlement and inquiry and philosophy, I have developed an approach to knowing that I call *covenant epistemology*. My own urgent life questions have always been epistemic. The single most helpful insight I uncovered in my personal search was Michael Polanyi’s epistemology of “subsidiary-focal integration.” Ever since I found it, it has made concretely practical sense of all my knowings in all dimensions of my life. I found that it opens all kinds of vistas and turns coming to know into delightful adventure. It makes you better at knowing. I and many others have found it to be personally healing. The *Little Manual* will get you on board with “SFI” in chapter 4.

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I was twenty-four or so when I first encountered SFI. I have lived out this approach for decades now. Over the years I found that it signposted and invited a larger vision of knowing, as well as of reality and life. I have come to believe we should think of knower and known as persons in relationship, where knowing is the relationship. This relationship has covenantal dimensions. By that I mean that the knower pledges her- or himself to the yet-to-be-known, the way a groom pledges himself to a bride. SFI plus the covenantal interpersonhood of knower and known is what I have in mind by covenant epistemology. Covenant epistemology both reorients our knowing therapeutically and offers a life-shaping vision.

About the *Little Manual*

I have already written two books on the subject of knowing. *Longing to Know* (2003) developed SFI to address in a fresh way the question whether we can know God. Readers easily saw it also held concrete applications to business, to art, to counseling, to education, to engineering, to athletics, even to detective work. I took the next eight years to put into words the further development of covenant epistemology, along with a philosophical argument in its defense: *Loving to Know* appeared in 2011. Readers of this book regularly undergo personal transformation.

This *Little Manual* is a short introductory manual useful for a quick but therapeutic entrée in connection with a wide variety of knowing ventures. The *Little Manual* can leave a lot out because the earlier books have gone over the ground carefully. Specifically, it leaves out citations. You can find, at the back of this book, a list of the sources of the key ideas that covenant epistemology adapts from others' work. All references here are documented in the other books. It also leaves out extensive argumentation. But if the *Little Manual* tantalizes you in further study, consider reading the others.

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The exercises are important!

Each little chapter of this book offers a copious amount of exercises for your own knowing venture. In a key way, these exercises are the most important part of the book. A manual is a how-to; that means you have to engage in the how-to. No ordinary person enjoys reading directions for the fun of it. Nor do we generally understand the directions and diagrams unless we are actually trying to do what they say. Similarly, with just about every sentence in this book, you'll find it makes sense in light of your own firsthand experience of your knowing venture. The exercises are there to prompt such important engagement. "Manual," after all, has something to do etymologically with *hand*.

Also, personalize the text and the exercises at every point possible to your own discipline or area of inquiry. College students should read it as about the college experience; business persons as about business; artists as about the creative act, would-be seekers of relationship—with others or with God—as just that. That you can do this will underscore a key emphasis of the *Little Manual*: knowing works like this in any field.

For everybody, not just Christians

My life and work have been shaped in the Christian tradition. It stands to reason that if you believe in the God of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, you would think it important to develop an epistemology that accommodates knowing God. Dealing God into knowing, of course, means dealing him into the epistemic driver's seat. Knowing him would be formative for knowing anything. At the same time, Scripture indicates that God actually accords hospitable space to his creation and to creaturely knowers. Real freedom is had because it is conferred generously by a personal Other.

What's more, in this view, we ourselves are not God; we are *creaturely* knowers. Our glory as humans is to know from a particular place and orientation, to journey toward what we do not yet know. Always we are on the way. We are on the way with respect to knowing God as well as knowing our world. We understand

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partially. We know as we give ourselves and as we are known. And Christian believers are not thereby more assured of “A’s on exams, nor of a successful business venture.

So this is a manual for *all* knowing ventures for *all* persons, no matter their religious orientation. For all that, if you are looking for it, covenant epistemology signposts knowing this God, and can lead you to him. Every act of insight suggests his giving, his coming, his redemptive knowing of us. And knowing him actually can make you better at knowing anything.

Epiphany: pilgrimage and gift

The well-known biblical story of the Magi who journey to find the Christ child and to bring gifts offers an emblematic story of knowing. They are not called wise men for nothing! Nor is it a meaningless accident that we use the word *epiphany* in referring to a moment of insight. Epiphany is the name of the church season in which we celebrate God’s revealing himself to these Gentiles—and to us.

Consider the Magi. Arabian astrologers, for years they had bound themselves to study what they half-understood. They studied the planets and stars, not for mere facts and figures about the planets, but because they pursued deeper meaning. They were not “collecting data,” building a bank of comprehensive information. They attended to the stars, we may surmise, in a loving and wondering search for wisdom: wisdom of the sort that comes to expression in a harrowing pilgrimage together beyond Arabia, across trackless wastes, across tense racial and political boundaries, into the unknown to find a foreign king to whom they deemed a certain star to belong, a king worth worshipping with their best gifts—treasures themselves fraught with portent. They bound themselves covenantally to the yet-to-be-known, in their growing expertise, to invite its gracious disclosure of deeper meaning. They bound themselves to that as-yet-unknown reality in taking up such a journey. What they actually found surprisingly transformed their half-understood inquiries as reality swept in and swept them up.

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Knowing is a *pilgrimage*. It requires taking personal responsibility, born of love, to pledge allegiance to what we do not yet know. It requires relying on seemingly opaque guidance to venture into the darkness of half-understanding. We invite its gracious and surprising self-disclosure, seeking to indwell its clues to make sense of a hidden pattern. We risk our forever being changed. It is an adventure.

Knowing is a pilgrimage *together*. The *Little Manual* addresses persons joining a team of explorers who intend to venture together toward knowing. But even if your journey seems a solitary one, at any point in it you can recognize how others have contributed to your journey, and how you can avail yourself of the camaraderie of others as you go forward. Reality proves to be richly multi-faceted. Working with others in our knowing venture, we can pool our diverse perspectives and training so that we can engage the world even more responsibly and effectively.

Knowing is a *gift*. Epiphany comes as a surprising encounter, equal parts knowing and being known. It could never have been achieved in a systematic or linear fashion. It transforms knower and known. Deep insight hints of exciting future prospects, confirming that we have made contact with reality. Pilgrimage modulates into an ongoing dance of communion. Reality proves to be deeply dynamic and welcomes us in. Knowing ushers in shalom.

Your knowing venture

You may be starting college. College is a knowing venture if anything is! Incoming freshmen, or any student poised on the brink of a fresh semester, will do well to give thought to whether learning involves more than amassing information, and how profound insight may be had. Any business venture involves coming to understand—a market, a product, a company, the past, the future. Business, like college, unavoidably binds knowledge to investment. Human endeavors such as scientific research, technological design, artistic creation, athletics, and human services, all involve knowing ventures. Effective practice in each involves the features and strategies this *Little Manual* identifies. Fulfilling a mission as a

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team is a knowing venture. Any sort of quest for self-discovery or growing interpersonal relationship is a knowing venture.

On the brink of what knowing venture do you stand? This little book offers pilgrim knowers a manual for the journey. I believe it also offers the prospect of joy.

Exercises for your knowing venture

From the following list, choose a few questions that you find especially suited to your knowing venture at this time. If you are part of a team, discuss your responses to these questions with the team, and as a team. Designating some time for this conversation should be part of your strategy in your knowing venture. Follow these directions for the questions at the end of every chapter.

1. Brainstorm, and list as many different sorts of knowing ventures you can think of.
2. What would you say is your current knowing venture?
3. What would you say is the thing you want to know, or the achievement you desire?
4. Tell the story of the origin of this venture. How does the story already display features of a journey or pilgrimage together?
5. Here at the outset of your venture, what puzzles do you have about knowing? Are there other times in your life where you have or have had similar puzzles?
6. Think of any examples that display an underlying knowledge-as-information orientation. Identify any ways you see that this approach might limit knowing ventures.
7. How does it help you and your knowing venture to see humans as philosophical? How does it make it harder?
8. Rate, on a scale from 1 to 10, the level of your commitment for this venture. Explain why you picked the number you did.

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9. What skills must you acquire as part of this venture? What will it take to acquire them?
10. Do you have a team in this venture? Briefly describe them and what they bring to the venture.
11. What other resources do you have to draw on?
12. How might this book be a resource for your knowing venture?

PART I

Pilgrimage

CHAPTER 1

Love

CHANCES ARE YOU THINK it strange to be setting out on a venture of knowing by talking about love. How can you love what you do not know? Do we not first know and then, possibly, love? Knowledge has nothing to do with love, anyway. Love would get in the way of facts. Love is an emotion. It's subjective and not rational. Love may be "all you need," but the songwriter didn't have in mind starting a business or going to college. Love isn't going to crack the code of reality. We need information.

This kind of thinking reveals an underlying epistemic orientation of knowledge-as-information. Our unexamined preconceptions of what knowledge is tend to disconnect talk of love and relationship from knowledge. This outlook, this *Little Manual* proposes, can hamper any knowing venture. Epistemological therapy is needed.

This little manual offers such therapy. But right here at the beginning, the reader will have to decide to trust the *Little Manual* that this will happen. This can be offensive and threatening. But it too is an epistemic matter. Exercising some kind of trust at the beginning of a knowing venture, and even throughout it, proves to be a necessary and helpful epistemic practice.

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Knowing and being go hand in hand

To begin talking about love in knowing, first we need to say something about reality and life. Epistemology and metaphysics can't help but go hand in hand. Reality is what we know. What we think of the one shapes what we think of the other. If you find that you think there is nothing more to reality than what lab experiments uncover or our eyes see, a little additional thought should show that this claim itself is not the sort of thing that lab experiments could ever uncover or eyes ever see. It is a metaphysical and epistemological claim. And it is the sort of claim that shapes what we think we see and how we understand knowing ventures. Metaphysics is unavoidable. It is deeply concrete and practical.

This book tackles things from the knowing side of the connected pair. But we can expect that the orientation the *Little Manual* helps you develop will in turn reshape your generally tacit view of reality. And here at the beginning, we have to say something about reality to start to make sense of why knowing begins with love.

Reality: impersonal bits or personal gift?

Our knowledge-as-information orientation additionally shapes our picture of reality. It tends to reduce reality to two-dimensional ones and zeros, impersonal bits, so much data to be collected. This way of seeing the world fits with our epistemic view that gaining knowledge means passively collecting impersonal information. The goal in this approach to knowledge can be to eliminate any mystery from an indifferent universe, amassing all the bits, eventually gaining comprehensive knowledge. It is a kind of mastery or conquest.

On the contrary, the *Little Manual* will say, reality is *gift*, and love is at the core of all things. It is not impersonal; rather, reality is person-like. It is not passive and inert. It is richly multi-faceted, deeply dynamic, ever new and surprising, never to be sapped of mystery. We must reorient our epistemic relationship to it to be

more like a dance of overture and response, of wooing and being wooed. We must replace indifferent distance with intimate care.

You may be familiar with an episode of the original *Star Trek* TV series, called “The Devil in the Dark.” Captain James T. Kirk and *Enterprise* crew at first take the Horta to be a massive boulder. The Horta, they discover with surprise, is a being—a mother protecting her eggs. Figuring that out changes the way they relate to the Horta from impersonal to interpersonal, and they make real progress in knowing reality. They gain understanding, and peace is restored. Changing your view from seeing reality as impersonal to seeing it as personal would be a shift such as this.

The idea of reality as gift seems to be a theological vision—the sort of thing we associate with religion. But it’s easily arguable that humans are incurably religious. People are even religious in their irreligion. However, religion or the justification of a theological vision is not the point of this book. Reality as gift is a metaphysical view that goes with the restored orientation in knowing that this *Little Manual* aids.

In fact, even apart from religion it can be seen that people tend to personify things. Where we have presumed that reality is impersonal, of course this seems an unwarranted superimposition. But why should we think that reality is, first, impersonal? Perhaps our latent metaphysic has depersonalized what is fundamentally personal.

Reality’s normative features

How can it be that reality is gift? No matter what thing in the world you think about, whether a spider plant or a biome, a clothes pin or a computer, that thing is made up of “stuff,” but it also has a certain “what-it-is-to-be-this-thing.” We can name the characteristics that make it what it is. The thing holds promise to continue to be what it is. We also use these characteristics to judge the excellence or inferiority of the particular specimen we are looking at—a “way-it-ought-to-be.”

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If you think about this, these features are normative. This means that there is an oughtness about them. Mere stuff cannot account for oughtness. But oughtness has to be there for there to be stuff. When you think about why things are the way they are, why they are there instead of not there, and how they came to be in the first place, whatever else is true about these questions, this normative dimension is necessary. Nature is not enough, as one writer puts it. He goes on to argue that reality is gift.

These normative elements are covenantal-promise or pledge-like. They involve words that don't describe, so much as enact or decree reality. Covenant makes reality.

It is intriguing that, in the Christian Scripture's story of creation, God says, "Let there be . . ." and then there is. (This has nothing to do with the question of evolution; oughtness makes reality, however it comes about.) I can relate to this easily when I think of all the birthday party games I invented over my children's young lives, and all the classes I have invented over my students' lives. I have said plenty of "let there be's," which have brought realities to be. Also, when my daughters each said "I do" at their weddings, they said something normative; they generously let something be, and that brought reality to be.

Normative . . . covenantal . . . interpersonal . . . gift . . . love is at the core of all things

And such words of pledge and promise suggest a relationship of persons in which they are embedded. Normative elements require a larger context of persons in relation as persons. If all real things require a "let there be," a normative dimension, they require a larger context of persons in which promise and covenant and gift pertain.

Covenant and promise are highly sophisticated interpersonal pronouncements. They are free; they might not have been pronounced. So they are gifts. They are persons' acts of love. They are commitments of love.

Gift has a normativity about it. A gift involves a ceremonial presentation, and appropriate manners. Gift-giving is something

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that only persons can enact. Like laughter, gift-giving and personhood always occur together—you can have neither without the presence of the other. Gift giving involves consent, a highly sophisticated, generous, letting be. Another thing that the idea of gift suggests is self-giving, and readiness on the part of reality to lavish us excessively. This is how love is at the core of all things.

Normativity, we may think, need not be gift. It could be, simply, law. We all can see that reality is law-like. But law itself is the enactment of persons—persons who need not have said let there be. That something might not be but yet is is occasion for wonder and gratitude—assuming that the might-not-be is good. In fact, in reality we do see law, and we do find much that prompts wonder, including law that prompts wonder. Law itself is gift.

So to think of reality as gift showcases the normative elements in reality. The normative dimension suggests the interpersonal context. It implies that reality is gift.

Thinking of reality as gift helps realign our orientation in knowing it. For how you respond to a gift is highly personal. It must be so, for the gift enactment to be genuine. If love is at the core of all things, if reality is, at its core, the highly sophisticated interpersonal act of gift, then knowing is quite sensibly a responding gesture of love. *We love in order to know.* Love, not bare information amassing, should characterize the way we relate to the world. And like the Horta, the world repays this shift in orientation.

In the Christian theological vision, obviously God is the one covenanting, promising, gifting, reality into existence. He is covenantally binding himself to the ongoing characterized reality and nature of my spider plant. No matter how, mechanically speaking, it comes to be, he continues to word it into existence. Whether or not you think you believe in God, attending to these normative dimensions of reality, and to reality as interpersoned gift, will make you more effective at your knowing ventures.