

# “Knowing for Shalom in Aliquippa: Covenant Epistemology and *The Prophetic Imagination*”

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## Introduction (Abstract)

Aliquippa, my hometown, is a small, post-industrial city on the Ohio River north of Pittsburgh. Built to feed the massive Jones and Laughlin Steelworks, a 7-mile-long plant that once employed 15,000, Aliquippa deteriorated into a drug- and violence-ridden ghost town after J&L’s sudden end in the mid-1980s; it remains in that state after thirty-five years. But the drab, dilapidated main street is punctured by a blaze of color and life: the Uncommon Grounds Café, a ‘third-space’ ministry of evangelist and counselor John Stanley, committed to city-wide restoration to spiritual wholeness through hospitality and listening. In this paper I want to show how the Café exemplifies *covenant epistemology* (introduced in my *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Cascade, 2011), concretely at work in ordinary life.

Covenant epistemology is an account of knowing which augments Polanyian epistemology to accredit, and render paradigmatic, pervasive covenantal, transformative and interpersonally relational dimensions. It argues that knowing should be understood as transformation rather than mere information, that we must *invite the real*, and that we may *know for shalom*. These and other features may be discerned in the Café’s dynamic effort to hear and restore Aliquippa, as well as in its intentional effort to embody the vision of Walter Brueggemann’s *Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress, 1978). This paper will explore and commend this epistemic paradigm, by its augmentation of a Polanyian epistemology and by its evident implementation in an ordinary but spiritual engagement in societal understanding and care.

First I will acquaint you with covenant epistemology as it moves beyond Polanyian subsidiary-focal integration, in the matter of the role of covenantal commitment in knowing, and in the matter of interpersonhood and the interpersonal as paradigm in knowing. I will briefly comment regarding features of Polanyi’s thought with suggest this development. Next, I will describe the Café outreach in Aliquippa and show how it exemplifies covenant epistemology in action. This includes the mission’s effort to embody Brueggemann’s signature vision.

## The destructiveness of the theoretical paradigm of knowledge

The modernist, theoretical ideal, while it has produced much theoretical, practical and social good and marked Western society irreversibly, has proved also to eventuate in destruction in all these areas.

As many contemporary philosophers have argued, this epistemic ideal—what in *Loving to Know* I call the defective epistemic default—cuts off knowledge from major, critical, portions of human life, as well as undercutting itself. It has fostered skewed emphases and pairs of “binary opposites,” opposing knowledge to belief, fact to value, science to art, reason to faith, mind to body, etc. It has tended to cut knowledge off from both known and knower and to cut knower off from known. It depersonalizes both, and dishonors both. It foments disengagement, irresponsibility, indifference, boredom, cluelessness, hopelessness, skepticism, cynicism, atheism, secularism,

societal and environmental damage of all sorts. It excludes adventure, confidence, risk, wonder and wisdom. It has eclipsed the dynamics of healthy knowing itself.

Polanyian epistemology directly challenges this false ideal, offering an alternative that starts to heal knowing even as it re-describes it.

It is well beyond my expertise to present and defend all the societal ramifications of the theoretical paradigm. But there are a couple aspects of it that especially bear on the matter of this talk about knowing and Aliquippa. One is that the modernist paradigm has been associated with capitalism and consumerism, the nasty underbelly of which is just what is apparent in Aliquippa. Many Christians have unwittingly aligned themselves with a consumerist capitalist economic. (I don't mean to imply either that I am a socialist, or that I am not a consumer myself.) Additionally, the theoretical paradigm has also helped render Christianity both excessively individualist and entirely inward, effectively sterilizing it with respect to "outward" concrete engagement in societal care. These results of modernity are the matters which Brueggemann is especially concerned to challenge in his work, as is the Café in Aliquippa. I want to suggest that shifting from the theoretical paradigm to something like covenant epistemology is foundational to cultural, social, and spiritual restoration. A healing epistemology may contribute to the healing of a broken town, and to restoring Christian vision and church involvement there.

Walter Brueggemann has written regarding the challenge of Easter preaching: "A substantive decision is required of us, for modernity has eroded even our readiness to hold to the miraculous scandal [of the Resurrection]."<sup>1</sup> The modes of doxology of sovereignty, narratives of inversion, and personal witnesses of amazed gratitude, he says, do not square with the technical epistemology of modernity: "...Matters of life and faith cannot be expressed in the tongues of modernity, for its very epistemology has consigned us to death and despair." Later I will return to describe his vision to recall the church to the prophetic imagination, back from "the royal consciousness," as he calls it, with its epistemology that strives to occlude all hope of an alternative vision.

### **From subsidiary-focal integration to covenant epistemology**

Covenant epistemology is the claim that the epistemic paradigm is the interpersonal, covenantally constituted, relationship. I build covenant epistemology out of three strands of ideas. One is Polanyian subsidiary-focal integration, augmented to a more intentional personal than Polanyi seems to have had in mind. Another is the motif of covenant as relationship. The third is a cluster of theses I refer to as interpersonhood.

Those aspects of Polanyi's work that I emphasize are the following.

First, the knowing experience that we should be trying to make sense of is not explanation. The real question is about *discovery*—how do you come to know in the first place? Plato posed this dilemma, and it has never been resolved in Western epistemology and culture characterized by the theoretical paradigm. Coming to know—discovery—itself has been discredited by this paradigm, the way faith or emotion has. Yet it is the act in which humans are most glorious and most engaged. Polanyi argued that the dilemma only stands as long as knowledge is restricted to what can be explicitly articulated. But persons on the way to knowing, like a sleuth endeavoring to solve a mystery, or a scientist on the track of a discovery, in fact rely on clues that they half understand, and on

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Truth-telling as Subversive Obedience* (K. C. Hanson, ed. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 50-51.

hunches that they would be hard pressed to verbalize. And they *must* do so. So we *must* accredit this tacit knowledge and these tacit powers. “We know more than we can tell,” was Polanyi’s famous aphorism.

*The act of coming to know*, according to Polanyi, involves a risky, responsible trajectory of scrabbling to rely in the right way on clues to elicit a coherent pattern. The struggling feat he calls *integration*; the clues, on which we rely, we are aware of and indwell “*subsidiarily*,” and the pattern is “*focal*”—we focus on it. An integrative trajectory such as a discovery can span minutes to years to a lifetime. When we achieve the pattern or make the discovery, we can experience an aha! moment as the newly appeared focal pattern transforms the clues we have been struggling to indwell and make sense of, as we have shifted from looking at disconnected particulars to indwelling them subsidiarily—looking *from* them—to elicit the pattern. The achievement of this pattern, along with an exciting, unspecifiable sense of future prospects, inclines us to submit to it as a token of reality. Subsidiary-focal integration characterizes not only the first act of coming to know, but the responsible, sustained, developing, grasp of it. Thus, no knowledge can ever be exhaustively focal or explicit; the focal is always outrun by the inarticulate, subsidiary roots which ground it. Subsidiary-focal integration is easily exemplified in reading, in athletics, in the creative artistic experience, in any learning endeavor. This includes the act of apprehending a city, a place such as Aliquippa.

I believe that the sorts of particulars which the knower’s integration merges into a pattern come in three sorts—what theologian John Frame has dubbed the normative, the situational, and the existential.<sup>2</sup> We subsidiarily indwell authoritative words and guides (the normative), the place of our puzzlement (the situational), and our own lived body (the existential), in scrabbling toward an integrative focal pattern which will transform all that we rely on. That transformative integration will render the clues different in appearance and meaningful, binding the knower more concretely in reality and authenticity, and inviting greater profundities that we cannot yet name. This last alludes to Polanyi’s four aspects of tacit knowing: the functional, phenomenal, semantic and ontological. As many of you know, I have devoted much delighted attention to the ontological aspect, associating it with Polanyi’s repeated, tantalizing, claim, that we know we have made contact with reality when our integration is accompanied with a sense of the possibility of indeterminate future manifestations.<sup>3</sup>

I have thought about and written about, and lived out, Polanyian epistemology for many years now. Over this time I have been led to augment it to create what I term *covenant epistemology*, which I regard as my own epistemological stance. The thesis of covenant epistemology is that the proper epistemic paradigm is not theoretical but rather one of interpersonal relationship. In *Loving to Know*, I tell how reflecting particularly on how Annie Dillard, Lesslie Newbigin, and Parker Palmer describe knowing both confirmed Polanyi’s proposals and amplified them.<sup>4</sup> Reading Author Dillard’s *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek*, it dawned on me that the efforts she made to see a muskrat could be described as covenantal behavior—a covenantal self-binding that, far from compelling the appearance of a muskrat, could only hope to invite it, and to delight in grace should it appear. The idea of covenant picks up Polanyi’s studied emphasis on personal responsibility in knowing. Missiologist Newbigin, seeking to heal Christendom, spoke of “another kind of knowing,” that of knowing a person directly, and of knowing as “being on the way.” He argued that this should be the epistemic paradigm, rendering knowing neither, reductivisitically, objective nor subjective. Educator Palmer articulated this thoroughly in his effort to reform educational practice. Palmer speaks of “truth as troth.” Both of these thinkers explicitly draw from Polanyi’s insights in building their own proposals.

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<sup>22</sup> Esther Lightcap Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Esther L. Meek, *Contact With Reality: An Examination of Realism in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*. (PhD diss., Temple University, 1983); see also “‘Recalled to Life’: Contact with Reality.” *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Journal* 26:3 (1999–2000) 72–83.

<sup>4</sup> Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), ch. 2.

These and many life experiences suggest that Polanyian epistemology could be seen to signpost the thesis of covenant epistemology. I argue that Polanyian epistemology has about it “hints of interpersonal reciprocity.”<sup>5</sup> Polanyi himself suggests the personhood of the knower as he argues cogently for the courageous responsibility and commitment, artful judgment, tacit powers, and inarticulate subsidiary awareness that support all epistemic feats. And this both individual and corporate: conviviality and tradition render societies of explorers the best knowers. In this he directly opposed the depersonalization of the knower endemic to the modernist ideal. Yet it seems that this trajectory may be taken further than he did, to explore the epistemic implication of knowers as *persons*; such an amplification would nevertheless accord with Polanyi’s epistemology of personal knowledge.

As for the known, that signature of integration to transform clues, and of reality to manifest itself indeterminately, such that insight is confirmed as such most clearly by it exceeding our expectations, of it coming together in comprehensive entities that have a life of their own, of reality that apparently responds graciously in mutuality to our often bumbling epistemic efforts—all this suggest something person-like about the known.

The third aspect—knowing itself—seems best understood as an interpersonal relationship of unfolding overture and response, covenantally constituted, as evidenced by best epistemic practices such as love, pledge, respect, humility, patience, and a host of other profoundly personal activities. This is what has led me to develop covenant epistemology.

So I add to Polanyian subsidiary-focal integration the motif of *covenant* developed by a former colleague, theologian Mike Williams. He understands covenant to be first and foremost interpersonal relationship—gracious relationship that is prior to family-like obligations, a mutuality that unfolds over time.<sup>6</sup> This serves to render epistemology in a personal—interpersonal—key: Palmer’s, “truth as troth,” Dillard’s covenantal muskrat-inviting behavior, and Polanyian responsibility, in a key of interpersonal intimacy.

But given our penchant for abstractions, and to combat the impersonal and depersonalizing theoretical paradigm, it is important to give extra attention to what I call *interpersonhood*. In fact, I believe that the notion of person and persons in relation is a crucially valuable motif to tap in epistemology. Interpersonhood includes the prior claim that to be a person involves other persons; personhood itself is *being in communion*. This is the claim of philosopher of religion John Macmurray and others.<sup>7</sup> Macmurray argues that the fundamental unit of human existence is not the I, but rather the *You and I*.<sup>8</sup> The fundamental self is not Descartes’ Self as Thinker, but rather the Self as Actor in relation to the Other. The former casts abroad “the field of the theoretical”; the latter, “the field of the personal.” The field of the personal is fundamental and inclusive of the theoretical; the field of the theoretical, when mistaken to be fundamental, excludes and debilitates the field of the personal. It is also

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<sup>5</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, ch. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, ch. 6.

<sup>7</sup> The others I have in mind are known as Trinitarian theologians: Colin Gunton (*Loving to Know*, ch. 12) and John Zizioulas. Also, theologian and Polanyi Society member Philip Rolnick accepts this notion of personhood as he traces its origin from the early church’s developing an understanding of the Holy Trinity (*Loving to Know*, ch. 13).

<sup>8</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, ch. 8.

ultimately self-destructive. While these notions of Macmurray's are difficult to work through and apprehend, it is nevertheless easy to see that for him being and knowing are intimately intertwined. The theoretical paradigm excludes the personal; the personal is foundational to knowing.

Interpersonhood means, secondly, that we should see this interpersonal relationship as the context and central nerve of knowing. Interpersonal communion of mother and infant itself is the first knowing—I believe, identifiable with a baby's first smile. It offers the original context of knowing along with being for any person who survives and thrives. As such it continues to context all knowing; it thus calls for an epistemic paradigm of interpersonal relationship. Also, I believe that Macmurray, though his idea of the personal may have been the source of Polanyi's "personal" in "personal knowledge,"<sup>9</sup> enables us to augment that personal, moving beyond Polanyi's own usage of it in a direction that subsidiary-focal integration nevertheless signposts. Blending Macmurray and Polanyi, for example, yields the stunning realization that Polanyi's "bodily rootedness of all thought" has a necessarily interpersonal character. But I believe that Polanyi, and not Macmurray, understands science as being, not a wasteland of theoretical knowing, but rather a dynamic region because it is continually pierced by the personal—"in, with, and under!" I agree with this.

Covenant epistemology also taps the insights of two other thinkers to this end. Martin Buber's well-known I-You mode of existence accords with Macmurray's vision. And Buber understands the moment of insight to be I-You encounter. I-You also is transformatively shaping event of our existence and maturation as persons and as knowers.<sup>10</sup>

James Loder's *Transforming Moment* is his account of "convictional knowing," that is, of the spiritual experience of the convicting presence of God.<sup>11</sup> He understands all knowing to be, effectively, subsidiary-focal integration, seen as a transformative event. To explain the profound dynamism that underlies all efforts to know, Loder layers on an account of humanness as four-dimensional. Two dimensions are our situation, or world, from which we differentiate our self as "ego." The third dimension outruns these two: it is the Void—the existential experience of the threat or possibility of not being. Both the third and the fourth dimensions must come to us from outside of ourselves in our life experience. We neither originate them nor cultivate them on our own. The fourth dimension of humanness is the gracious, delivering, incursion of the Holy, that is, of the possibility of new being. This recenters us and makes us fully human. Loder argues that the act of insight taps down into the Void-Holy dynamic. Additionally, Loder aligns this with an account of human development that features the centering anchor of the face as the "nucleus of trust." And finally, for Loder all this becomes the grammar which the Holy Spirit mysteriously commandeers in any experience of being known transformatively by God.

Loder's densely creative account integrally connects knowing (as subsidiary-focal integration) with interpersonal relationship and with being—with ontology. Being involves consent, letting flourish; it involves gift, and beauty. It also connects all human knowing, at least prototypically, with knowing and being known by God—the heart of the Christian vision.

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<sup>9</sup> James Houston reports that Polanyi got the personal in personal knowledge from John Macmurray (*Loving to Know*, ch. 8). However Philip Mullins believes that he got it from J. H. Oldham (personal conversation).

<sup>10</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, ch. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, ch. 10.



Having explored all three strands, we are now in a position to identify signature features of knowing on the paradigm of covenant epistemology. All knowing is an unfolding trajectory of coming to know. It is knowing *on the way*. It takes us up in an adventure, a quest, a pilgrimage from need toward shalom. The fundamental dynamic of coming to know is a *responsible, risky, passionate commitment*, said Polanyi, where commitment just is this disposing ourselves toward the yet to be known. This fundamental dynamic is, thus, says covenant epistemology, *longing, love*. I argue that *we do not know in order to love; we love in order to know*.<sup>12</sup> And along the way, we are guided by what I call a half-understanding, an *anticipative knowing*—*a being on the way to knowing*.

The covenant epistemology paradigm enjoins an epistemic practice different from that of the impersonal, theoretical paradigm. What we must do is not passively demand bits of information (to the end of power and control) but rather *invite the real*<sup>13</sup>. We may invite it the way we invite a person to self-disclose. That means that we should practice *epistemological etiquette*; we should *behave covenantally*. If you want to know something, you need to comport yourself in a covenantally self-binding way. As in a wedding, we must bind ourselves, promising to “love, honor and obey” what we do not yet know, in the hope and promise of its gracious self-disclosure. This means caring in hope of knowing, loving in order to know.

As part of epistemological etiquette, it requires *placing oneself in the place insight is likely to show up*. It involves *living life on the terms of the yet-to-be-known*. It means *conferring the dignity of delight and noticing regard* on the yet-to-be-known, committed to attending patiently to it. “Delight is the premise of any sound Christian epistemology,” says David Bentley Hart. This involves what Catholic mystic Simone Weil calls *creative attention*. It actually brings reality to be more itself in a new way. “Love sees what is invisible” she says; she is talking about the Good Samaritan’s attention to the inert lump of flesh in the gutter, which thereby creates him as a human person. You can see how this would be healing, *knowing for shalom*.

As Buber says of the I-You mode of being, it involves “Saying ‘You’ and listening.” Or Newbigin’s poignant, “Is anyone there?” It means listening long and beyond our preconceived categories. It requires exercising a humility and vulnerable, risky openness to being known in the process. I believe that there is a back and forth of *overture and response*, a kind of *dance* of knower and known, that unfolds their *relationship*, to the end of *communion*.<sup>14</sup> According to the Cappadocian church fathers, *perichoresis* is the movement of the Holy Trinity,

Knowing isn’t so much about information as it is about *transformation*. As Abraham Joshua Heschel indicates in contrasting the Greeks and the Jews: we must learn not in order to comprehend so much as in order to be apprehended. In coming to know, we find that we *ourselves have been known*, and changed. We have matured as persons and knowers, we are bound intimately with reality and it with us, and in some way we have met God.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful for Richard Allen’s discussion of Max Scheler’s thought for this claim (*Loving to Know*, 429-30).

<sup>13</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, ch. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, ch. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Hence, to teach an epistemology of transformation cannot be simply to convey information! It must bring change—epistemological therapy.

The central aspect of knowing is the very active dynamism of coming to know and being known transformatively. Covenant epistemology claims that *being known redemptively by Christ is one such knowing*, in fact, the paradigmatic knowing. Indeed, the Supper at Emmaus, in which the disciples' eyes were opened in the breaking of the bread, and our regular enactment of it in the Eucharist, gives us the model for all knowing.

Williams emphasizes that the motion of Scripture is not ascent, but rather descent; not our ascending to God but his descending to his people. The integrative moment of *insight*, when it comes, also gives us a sense that reality didn't answer our questions so much as change the questions and transform us in the process. You also have the sense that *reality has disclosed itself* in an act of unmerited grace, and that in this you have been blessed by the freshness of new being.

Thus it is that covenant epistemology showcases the critically important aspects which the modernist epistemic paradigm excises from our picture of knowledge and knowing.

### Revisiting Polanyi in light of covenant epistemology

In preparation for this presentation, prompted by the comment of an anonymous reader of my proposal, I have reread extended portions of *Personal Knowledge*, as well as of *Study of Man*.<sup>16</sup> I read to see whether covenant epistemology as I have developed it is already present in Polanyi's work.

We have already seen several alignments between the two that confirm their accord.<sup>17</sup> Also, we know that Polanyi explicitly affirms that an integrative pattern holds prospects for further elucidation that were only implicit in the originator's own thought. And while it is possible to violate the heart of the thing, it is also the case original integration supports a range of legitimate further developments. I believe that covenant epistemology is one such truthful development, moving beyond Polanyi while remaining true to his best insights.

Viewing Polanyi's work from the vantage point of covenant epistemology brings to notice a few claims of his—things he affirmed readily, but that have deeper significance when viewed in this way. One is his frequent discussion of facial physiognomies as prime examples of patterns fraught with superimposed meaning.<sup>18</sup> He also says that we subsidiarily indwell another person's physiognomy in knowing that person's mind.<sup>19</sup>

Another intriguing feature of his work is his talk of conviviality—so dear to this group of Polanyi scholars.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Corrected ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

<sup>17</sup> Rereading these works, the following passages especially seemed to accord with the covenant epistemology thesis. Polanyi uses words that go with an interpersoned epistemology and ontology: the objectivity of a theoretical vision (PK ch 1); profundity, beauty entrances (PK 15); passionate participation essential to knowing (PK 17); vision of reality; commitment akin to love; foreknowledge...order; an intentional change in being (PK 64); intellectual passions; love of truth = love of the kind of society which fosters these values (PK 133f); learner must believe before he can know; also acceptance of authority (PK 208); religion transposes all intellectual experiences into its own universe (PK 284); intimations of a hidden reality (PK 311).

<sup>18</sup> Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 33.

Working from the idea of tacit “civic coefficients of our intellectual passions,” which are warranted by the fact that knowing is the enterprise of a society, a tradition in which knowers are formed and live and work together, Polanyi develops the richly innovative notion of conviviality.<sup>20</sup> Polanyi would no doubt locate covenant epistemology’s engagement of mother and infant within this enterprise, as the acquisition of language and the transmission of social lore.<sup>21</sup> He defines “pure conviviality” as the cultivation of good fellowship. Pure conviviality is fostered within small groups of people living and working together.<sup>22</sup>

I feel confident that conviviality could be explored to amplify covenant epistemology’s account of interpersonalhood in knowing. However, absent from Polanyi’s discussion is consideration of the mutually transformative, person-developing, nature of face-to-face encounter, as per Buber and Loder. While there is kinship here, at the very least Polanyi’s agenda is different from that of covenant epistemology.

Related to both matters, physiognomy and conviviality, is Polanyi’s extended discussion of knowing another person’s mind,

or the active center of an animal. We know these, as I said, by dwelling within the unspecifiable particulars of the mind’s external manifestations.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, those external manifestations are that mind’s own dwelling place, Polanyi says. We do the same when we focus on the intelligence of a rat.<sup>24</sup> Ascending the levels of reality to the highest, knowing a person’s mind, our involvement becomes intercourse—that is, more and more mutual, more of a confrontation.<sup>25</sup> Fellow feeling expands with the perception of an active center.<sup>26</sup> Knowing another person’s mind involves understanding, indwelling, and appreciation.<sup>27</sup> Valuations become progressively more intimate.<sup>28</sup> Referencing Teilhard du Chardin’s noosphere, Polanyi talks of the joint participation in “the creation of objects destined to gratify the same passions in others,” “timeless and ubiquitous things,” the “spiritual grounds of the human mind.”<sup>29</sup> In *Study of Man*, Polanyi is concerned to connect the study of man continuously with the study of nature by way of our gradually modifying our engagement of gradated series of levels of being of a comprehensive entity. In this and other discussions, it is evident that, for Polanyi, knowing the mind of another person, and the development of this noosphere, the free society Polanyi cherishes above all, are the highest level.<sup>30</sup> The dramatic historian exemplifies this as he or she indwells the mind of Napoleon or other world historical figures in the sympathetic contemplation of his actions. Indeed, in describing this engagement, Polanyi says that observation transmutes into encounter.<sup>31</sup> This involves a reverent submission to Napoleon in his greatness.

Again, while important elements here signal accord between covenant epistemology and Polanyi’s, the two have different though complementary agendas. Covenant epistemology, perhaps we may also say, takes a more phenomenological route that works out the transformative impact of knowing and being known by persons, and that calls us to make that epistemically normative, down through all the levels of being and knowing. Indeed, the gracious deliverance of I-You encounter from time to time pierces all inquiry. I believe it may be seen as prototypically

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<sup>20</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 203ff.

<sup>21</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 207.

<sup>22</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 210.

<sup>23</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 34, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 71, 85, 96.

<sup>31</sup> Polanyi, *Study of Man*, 95.



present, as per Loder's four dimensions, in every moment of insight. And being itself, following Phil Rolnick's account, is itself gift, in a reality typified by the primacy of the personal.<sup>32</sup>

Polanyi's Christian commitment does not involve him in acknowledging a transcendent person or Trinity of Persons, as per the Apostles Creed. Or rather, his account involves him in rendering such references as entirely exhausted in the highest level of human mind and thought together in the noosphere. No wonder that Polanyi gives no focal place to the gracious inbreaking of the Holy, of the Other, in all levels of being. Yet his Jewish and Christian heritages are never far from his language, such that a commitment to the God of Holy Scripture in his ontological transcendence yet intimacy of presence in creation, seems to cohere easily with his vision. This coherence is evident in the use and development Newbigin makes of Polanyi's thought.<sup>33</sup>

This leads to the final feature of Polanyi's work which I wish to note from the vantage point of covenant epistemology. It is his discussion of dwelling in and breaking out.<sup>34</sup>

The following sentences represent my summary of some of his claims. I take Polanyi to be saying that the astronomer indwelling the entire subject of astronomy as a theoretical vision, experiences enjoyment that is unavailable if she is focally and routinely employing its formulae. True understanding involves this indwellingly contemplative experience, and in this we allow the world to shape us (--I think he is saying). It is an urge toward "dual satisfaction." Yet this urge requires us from time to time to break out of previously held frameworks. In that moment of breaking out, the mind directly experiences its content, rather than controlling it through previously established modes of interpretation, overwhelmed by its own passionate activity. This sounds to me like a description of the moment of insight which does in fact register its transformative nature.

Dwelling in a theoretical vision is wondrous, but that never seems to satisfy, it seems Polanyi is saying. We are drawn on ever beyond our current happy home. Polanyi talks of the essential restlessness of the human mind. He conjectures that this is an urge to break through all fixed conceptual frameworks in an act of ecstatic vision. Contemplation, he says, dissolves all things that we rely on that screen us from immersion in experience. In this, he says, we take on an impersonal life in the objects of our contemplation. (Why impersonal?) In this experience the religious mystic experiences the world uncomprehendingly as a divine miracle, and in absolute ignorance, union with Him. (Why uncomprehendingly?) It is a radical anti-intellectualism. (Why anti-intellectual?) Indwelling the Christian faith, he says, is a sustained effort at breaking out. Thus, in this ultimate experience, indwelling is not superseded by breaking out, but we indwell the breaking out continually. Proximity to God is not an observation, for it overwhelms and pervades the worshipper, transforming him or her. Thus it does not involve the detachment that observation requires. And Polanyi notes that he believes that for the Christian worshipper, this indwelling is not enjoyed (in contrast to the astronomer), because of the central confession of guilt and prayer for mercy. (Why not love?) Christian worship, he says, is, as it were, an eternal, never to be consummated hunch, a heuristic vision which is accepted for the sake of its unresolvable tension. (Why not consummated? Why unresolvable tension?)

This passage contains even more than I sketch here. But this is enough to see that the passage is allusive and mysterious, though deeply meaningful and moving. I cannot pretend to understand it fully. But following covenant epistemology's approach, I have certain puzzles with it, which I have noted in parentheses in the paragraph above. I believe they may be resolved if we inject the notion of encounter with a *person* who is the most real being. This is central to a historic Christian understanding. Person, in particular, the person of God who is, in David

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<sup>32</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, ch. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 195ff.

Kettle's words, our ultimate context, but who approaches us in hospitality, satisfies the deepest longing that contemplative desire seeks.<sup>35</sup> And as St. Augustine famously prays, it brings all restlessness to rest in Him. The end is communion, in which both persons are most fully themselves.<sup>36</sup> This is not a rejection of rationality, but a deeper rationality—what covenant epistemology argues should be paradigmatic of all rationality, even (especially!) scientific observation. Buber enjoins us to take the transformed, matured, “I of I-You” into all our “I-its.”<sup>37</sup>

James Loder concludes his introduction to his work about the convicting presence of God with these marvelous words: “...in the end we will not be able to imagine the depth and magnitude of the reality to which even the best images of the most profound minds are pointing us. All understanding and models must finally become transparent and vanish. Then, in death to all else, each one may appear face to face before the one who always comes from the other side of ultimate human emptiness.”<sup>38</sup> In many ways this resonates with Polanyi's claims noted here. Yet there is more: a greater Person who is more deeply real, and who comes to us in grace that transforms. Such a reality would transform both us and epistemology. I do not sense that this I is contained in Polanyi's account.

### Knowing for shalom in Aliquippa

Now turning to Aliquippa, including a summary of Brueggemann's claims. I believe that the Café outreach in Aliquippa offers a concrete example of covenant epistemology in action. This is especially significant because it subversively, healingly, challenges a city fraught with the wreckage of the underside of progress, one in which churches apparently have been uninvolved in a concrete way. As such, it makes the case for covenant epistemology.

Uncommon Grounds Café began with the closing of a church and the radical rehabilitating of an abandoned building on Franklin Avenue, Aliquippa's main street. It is a place where people of all kinds gather for excellent, inexpensive, food and coffee, along with artistic expression, the sharing of stories and the building of community. It's a place where people coming out of prison and rehab can do work release and community service, in a therapeutic environment. The Café regularly offers Way-Out workshops and AA groups. It offers art classes and shows, weekly open mic nights, and family movie nights. It has sponsored a Saturday morning prayer meeting for pastors of both the white and the black ministeria for the last three years.<sup>39</sup> The Café is run mostly by volunteers. It has come to anchor a growing network of collaborative volunteer efforts in the community.

As I have completed *Loving to Know*, I have realized that what John has been doing in Aliquippa is a great instance of covenant epistemology.<sup>40</sup> There are plenty of possible parallels between covenant epistemology and what might be going on in Aliquippa. There is underway a *long unfolding trajectory of coming to know* in Aliquippa. The Stanleys have been inviting the

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<sup>35</sup> David J. Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context: Towards the Conversion of the West; Theological Bearings for Mission and Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, ch. 9.

<sup>38</sup> James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989.), 8.

<sup>39</sup> As you may imagine, a huge part of the county-Aliquippa dynamic is racial.

<sup>40</sup> The Café appears in *Loving to Know* as an example of “saying ‘You,’ and listening,” in the epistemological etiquette (ch. 15, 453).

real in Aliquippa since they moved from Australia to Franklin Avenue in 2001; the actual Café has been coming to be and then operating since around 2005. Even now, to talk to John is to hear a vision that is only partially realized. It is half-understood and still on the way. John Stanley's vision stops neither at the property lines nor at boundaries of actuality. He imagines an alternative future that is city-wide—actually, county-wide.

The Stanleys and the Café located in the very place from which to invite the real in Aliquippa. *They put themselves and the Café in the way of knowing*, in the place they long for reality to self-disclose.<sup>41</sup> Notice, care, and delight can be seen in a small way in my own Aliquippa story, but far more profoundly in John's and in the Café itself. John has latched on to my phrase, *we do not know in order to love; we love in order to know*.

Perhaps the practice that consolidates all this, as the Café's inviting the real, is *listening*. *The act of listening can be seen as a covenantal self-binding to live life on the terms of the yet-to-be-known, and therein to invite it*. As long as I have been listening to John, I have heard him say some provocative things about listening. He talks of "listening evangelism," of people who, while you listen, "save themselves." John's own listening reflects his gently bringing to bear his own Walter Brueggemann-inspired interpretive framework and strategy.<sup>42</sup> "If Aliquippa were a person," he says, "you would send her to grief counseling. How do you help a city caught in numbness, a numbness unable to imagine life without J&L, come to grieve its past, cry out to God, and begin to embrace hope and imagine an alternative future?" Ever since John read Brueggemann's *Prophetic Imagination* 25 years ago, he has striven to understand and live out what Brueggemann is saying.

### Parenthesis on Brueggemann

What follows, as a parenthesis in the story of John's Café, is an extended summary of that book's claims which bear on the Aliquippa ministry. Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, offers an account of the ministry of the Israel's prophets which he is convinced is much needed by Christian churches coopted and domesticated in the current, Enlightenment-engendered, satiated consumerist ethos. Of special interest to me are the epistemological dimensions of Brueggemann's claims, which we will see in the summary, and of John's implementation of them—John is using Brueggemann as an authoritative guide and an framework by means of which to interpret the situation in Aliquippa. These dimensions accord with covenant epistemology.

Brueggemann writes: "The hypothesis I will explore here is this: *The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.*"<sup>43</sup>

The prophet's role is to tap into the church's forgotten faith tradition, to nurture and alternative consciousness by criticizing and dismantling the dominant consciousness and energizing persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move. The prophetic calls the

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<sup>41</sup> The Café offers all Beaver Countyans that placing, too. To be in the Café is to be on the spot, in the heart of Aliquippa. It is a safe space in which you may take in city life; you can let your fear subside so that you can begin to see and listen. You may begin to *indwell*, to *climb into the clues* in a way that may evoke a profounder pattern. Learning to see Aliquippa involves learning to see from Aliquippa. It is also learning to see yourself.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1978).

<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

community of faith to live in fervent anticipation of the newness that God has promised and will surely give.<sup>44</sup> In this alternative vision is linked theology and sociology: “the freedom of God will surface in the brickyards and manifest itself as justice and compassion.”<sup>45</sup>

This is in opposition to the “royal consciousness”: a hegemonic empire which claims to have rendered God’s power accessible, satiated all needs and obviated all need to hope for the future.<sup>46</sup> Brueggemann names the Egypt of the Israelite slaves, and the Solomonic era in Israel, as instances of the royal consciousness. The royal consciousness numbs the people it “serves,” rendering them even insensitive to their own pain and suffering. Writing in the 70s, Brueggemann calls attention to modernity’s consumerist satiety that also has engulfed the church of Christ.

Epistemology is integrally intertwined with the royal consciousness and the prophetic task. For Brueggemann, as for Heschel, he says, doxology—worship of the true, radically free God of newness—is the last full act of human freedom and justice.<sup>47</sup> Doxology is the ultimate challenge to the language and epistemology of managed reality, and is alone the universe of discourse in which energy is possible.<sup>48</sup> “Prophetic imagination...is intensely concerned with matters linguistic (how we say things) and epistemological (how we know what we know)...”<sup>49</sup> The prophet is engaged in a battle for language, in an effort to create a different epistemology out of which another community might emerge.<sup>50</sup> The prophet engages in a battle for the definition of reality.<sup>51</sup>

Prophetic criticism begins with helping people recover the capacity to grieve—“the most visceral announcement that things are not right.”<sup>52</sup> Crying out, John Stanley echoes, is the one cry God is sure to hear and answer. Bringing the hurt of marginal people to public expression, says Brueggemann, is an important first step in the dismantling criticism that permits a new reality, theological and social, to emerge. Grief and crying out permits hope to be restored.

Additionally, Brueggemann says, the vocation of the prophet is to keep alive the ministry of imagination.<sup>53</sup> To imagine a new gift given from the outside violates our reason.<sup>54</sup> The language of amazement is against the despair just as the language of grief is against the numbness.<sup>55</sup> He writes: “Have you ever been in a situation where because of anger, depression, preoccupation, or exhaustion you could not sing? And then you could? Change resulted from being addressed, called by a name, cared for, recognized, and assured.”<sup>56</sup> Jesus, the ultimate prophet, engages in the business of “...making visible the odd abnormality that had become business as usual.”<sup>57</sup> “On every imaginable front, Jesus is restoring the victims of the royal consciousness.”<sup>58</sup>

Grief (criticism) and amazement (energizing) evoke new reality, the imagined alternative vision. Newness comes precisely from expressed pain, says Brueggemann. “Suffering made audible and visible produces hope, articulated

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Always connected are a religion of immanence, an economics of affluence, and a politics of oppression. (Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 30)

<sup>47</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 18. Note also the quote given earlier in this essay.

<sup>49</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 73.

<sup>52</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 71.

<sup>57</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 88.

<sup>58</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 107.

grief is the gate of newness, and the history of Jesus is the history of entering into the pain and giving it voice.”<sup>59</sup> And he says that “...song penetrates royal reason...and in any case the energizing hope comes precisely to those ill-schooled in explanation and understandings. It comes to those who will settle for amazements they can neither explain nor understand.”<sup>60</sup>

### [end of summary; return to story of Aliquippa]

I first read *Prophetic Imagination* last summer. I could not help but annotate the text’s margins with references to the Café and Aliquippa. Indeed, it is difficult not to see John Stanley in the role of prophet, of criticizing and energizing a people, and Aliquippa as those marginalized by the royal consciousness of consumerist capitalism.<sup>61</sup> The Café ministry is designed to help people past numbness (numbness especially to pain and death) to truth in story-telling, and thence to grief and embracing hope. It is designed to provoke people to imagine an a vision for the city alternative to the entrenched hegemony of J&L, now even 35 years after it disappeared. And the Café’ catalyzes alternative community. So the Café is itself a listening space. It is a concrete and safe space in which continually to birth and nurture this caring, delighting, notice, in the practice of listening.

Beaver County’s churches were not getting it—about Aliquippa, nor about their own identity and mission. When he first came here and started listening, it became apparent that what was needed was not another church—there were 48 already in the 15001 zip code. A third space (not church, not bar) was needed, not just for the numb poor of Aliquippa, but also for the sleeping churches and citizens of Beaver County. So the Café is itself a listening space. It is a concrete and safe space in which continually to birth and nurture this caring, delighting, notice, in the practice of listening. John regularly asks church-goers if they anticipate concretely that God answers their petitions in the Lord’s Prayer, specifically, “Thy kingdom come.” “What will it look like for God to answer that prayer? What does the kingdom of heaven look like on Franklin Avenue? Those questioned begin to recognize and move beyond their own numbing satiety. Newness starts to break in.

In insisting that volunteers listen to the city and to people, John is seeking to evoke the newness that is the inbreaking of the alternative vision, the wholeness, dignity and justice in community that the reality of the freedom of God always engenders. In regular training sessions, John teaches Café volunteers to shut up and listen. Listening is not collecting information, not even to fill one’s own mental picture. It isn’t about solving problems or allocating funds. Listening is not passive. (All this would be listening on a defective epistemic model and from a modernist metanarrative.) Volunteers learn techniques of reflective listening, which reflects back to the person what they are feeling, that steadily invites and does not derail what is *transpiring* in that person’s voicing of their story. This is a therapeutic listening that treats with integrity the reality of what is there, and of what may be coming to be.

Listening evokes the person, rather than short-circuiting a process disrespectfully with a solution, no matter how generous. Listening itself is a safe space in which the heard person may pare themselves down to the healthy core of truth in their lives, to discover themselves and take

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<sup>59</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 91.

<sup>60</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 104.

<sup>61</sup> I could say a lot here about John and Alison’s life and involvements to make this compelling case. Space does not permit.



responsibility to rebuild. According to John Stanley, people caught in relationships, personal and structural, where power is abused—the sort of thing common with poverty, addiction, prostitution and crime—are mired because they are hopeless. Where there is hopelessness, no amount of external fixing will help, no matter how well-intended. John says that we need to listen until people hear themselves. Listening gives space for people to come to name what is not right. Then, validated in that listening, they may take responsibility for themselves, and embrace hope. In hope alone may a person speak truthfully, what I have been living with is not right, and then cry out for help. Then, embedded in relationship, as people take responsibility, people can move toward forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice. Injustice and justice transpire in relationships. Finding what needs fixed and fixing it transpires in relationships. So it seems there is a cluster of things that transpire in tandem when you invite the real: relationship, responsibility, hope, and the coming of God.

Café volunteers are to listen, additionally, so as *to invite God*—to discern what he is already at work doing in a person’s life. Listening is also about being still to hear what God may be doing *in you*. The expectant posture must be authentic: the listener is no less in need of his coming than the listened to. *We move toward shalom in mutuality with the real that we know for shalom*. When it comes, we too are changed, and we are bound together in wholeness. The Café proves to be a place in which you rightly find that you are the needy one, and that you are listening your own self into wholeness. I have seen this happen to my students; and I have experienced it myself. I have seen a number of my church friends get the same surprised and excited look in their eyes as they find themselves apprehended by God in Aliquippa.

There is a kind of initiation experience for Café volunteers that enables them to experience *the dynamic event that occurs* when you listen. Everyone must participate in an enactment of the Gospel account of Jesus and the woman with a years-long bloody discharge. Reflecting on it, apart from enacting it, is disqualified. (That would be the defective epistemic default, you see.) I knew that my Geneva spring break students always were put through this and found it transformative. Last summer for the first time I participated with my church mission team. I’ll never forget the sight of a mature woman in my church lying on her stomach on the floor, screaming out her pain. I’ll never forget how I felt, how somehow reality changed and new reality invaded. Jesus listened with no interrupting commentary to her entire agonized profession. In the process, he exacted silence and attention of all the bystanders. He compelled them to see her and hear her for perhaps the first time. What came out of the woman was an uncompromising profession of Jesus’s divinity that redrew reality in that space. The reconfigured reality included her healing. His designation of her as a daughter of Israel conferred her reinstatement to church and society and blessing. In its intertwining with the story her rabbi Jairus’s daughter is the implicit implication that the church needs the woman—her faith and her restoration. Listening subversively installs a new reality of shalom. Epistemologically, this enactment involves volunteers in putting themselves in the way of knowing, and it reveals that knowing involves a transformative change in reality that implicitly is a coming God.

A key way that the Café invites the real through listening is in providing both the space and the encouragement for telling one’s own story, for artistic self-expression. A couple weeks ago at Open Mic Night, I heard, one young woman from the prison, for the first time ever, read her own poems to an audience. In that huge crowd, you could have heard a pin drop as they took in her artistry and conferred dignity transformatively.

A couple months ago, the Café organized a fabric and fashion art evening. This was especially meaningful because the Café building originally had been a women’s dress shop. As Aliquippa fell on hard times, it became a strip tease bar. Women’s clothes on; women’s clothes—and dignity—off. Then it was abandoned. Now the building offers a safe place where women must be treated with dignity and respect. That evening was the crowning jewel, however. A couple fashion designers needed models to display their art. The Café team asked a couple of the women serving their work release hours if they would be willing to model the clothing. That involved getting their hair and makeup done. Dean Baldwin, the Café’s artistic coordinator, told me that in the process the two women’s

whole demeanor transformed—their countenances, their posture. It was not merely acted out on the runway and in the poses; it took hold within them in beauty, in reality. That night the Café building was in a way redeemed. But so were the women; within two weeks they embraced the redemption of Christ. Inviting these women to model the clothing was inviting the real, inviting reality to come in newness.

One final comment about listening that invites the real in Aliquippa. John Stanley has been at it for a long time. He knew it would take *patience*—waiting in hope. But it's taken ever more patience—patience stretching beyond all the deadlines he has to-date posited. But this just is *covenant faithfulness, binding yourself covenantally to the yet-to-be-known. It is what it takes to invite the real.*

## Conclusion

Covenant epistemology offers a healthy understanding of knowing that that deals back in critically formative features such as love, delight, wonder, covenant faithfulness in unfolding mutuality with the yet-to-be-known, with a dynamic of inviting the real that evokes transformation to the end of shalom. Covenant epistemology offers a vision of knowing that accords with being and doing and the signature motion of God, which is to come in newness.

Covenant epistemology augments the Polanyian vision in a way which nevertheless remains true to its invaluable core insights. It goes to the bank on the primacy of the personal, to use Phil Rolnick's apt phrase. And covenant epistemology may be seen to be operative in John Stanley's visionary mission in Aliquippa; aligning these two allows each to offer insight into and corroboration of the other. This pairing underscores the way epistemology shapes our lives and culture, and thus the importance to persons and to society of epistemological therapy.