

Traveling Companion: Is Ignorance Bliss?

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I finished the prayer service at the funeral home for a 40-year-old man who died of a brain aneurysms. His cremated remains sat on a simple table surrounded by a childhood portrait on one side and a collage of photos of his life on the other side.

I stepped outside and stopped to chat with one of the funeral directors. While doing so, a man, in his mid fifties stopped, came over and started talking without introducing himself. He said, "I now know that life is precious and shouldn't be taken for granted. I am the survivor of a quadruple heart bypass and I thank God every day that I am alive." As he continued to talk, I presumed he was a friend of the deceased and was counting his own blessings.

The whole episode reminded me of how little control we have over life; how in spite of our information overload, we are so ignorant.

Having spent twelve years in a university setting, I am very much aware of the proliferation of knowledge. Students soak in knowledge like a hungry sponge. They research constantly. Professors publish continually. On line, one can find an expert in anything and everything, feeding the hungry frenzy from the ridiculous to the redemptive.

Yet, one thing puzzles me. What happens when there is no answer to the questions being asked? In other words, how do we deal with our own ignorance? We hold knowledge in such high esteem that we don't know what to do or how to cope when we encounter our own ignorance.

Of course, by ignorance, we don't mean stupidity. Instead, we mean the fact that we do not know what to do in a certain situation. There are times in our lives when we don't know what to do. During such times, we feel frustration, pain, and helplessness. We have to acknowledge such times; otherwise, we end up stuck in a quagmire of frustration.

I remember reading a jingle that said: he who knows not and knows not that he knows not, is a fool, shun him. He who knows not and knows that he knows not can be taught, teach him. In other words, ignorance can present us with a teachable moment.

In a sense, ignorance can be a virtue because it can help us move beyond the superficialities of life to the crown of life. Sometimes we can read all the self-help books, consult all the experts, counsel with the seers but they leave us with no choice but to surrender ourselves into the arms of our beckoning voice.

When I reflect on my own life, I can remember times when I had it all figured out; times when I knew how things should turn out and, of course, I had good, logical and solid reasons to support my thinking. Then what happened? Well, my plans evaporated in the morning mist and I was left to lick the wounds of my self-confidence and discover how little control I had over my life. Ignorance presented me with a reality check and I learned that uncertainty was one of the most certain things in my life. I also learned that this uncertainty led me to choices I hadn't anticipated and places I hadn't intended but needed to visit.

Most of all, I have learned and continue to learn that when I forgo the demands for knowledge and certainty, I will discover that the inner resources of the heart will lead me from despair to hope, doubt to faith, chaos to enlightenment, information to insight, knowledge to wisdom and tragedy to triumph.