

To Know and To Be Known

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Mark Zuckerberg has made a ton of money playing God. He may not seem very divine, but Zuckerberg has made Facebook virtually omnipresent around the world and become one of its richest people in the process. Facebook, at over 2 billion users, is even more popular outside the U.S. than here, even though it is blocked in China, Iran and North Korea, and restricted in many other countries as a social media platform. Still, no one has as much influence on the daily life of people around the planet than Mr. Facebook himself.

On Thursday, Zuckerberg announced that Facebook would even enhance this by changing its algorithm to prioritize more interaction between users and their friends list, with less content from advertisers, publishers, and commercial brands. According to David Ginsberg, director of research at Facebook, “When people are engaging with people they’re close to, it’s more meaningful, more fulfilling... It’s good for your well-being.”¹ With these improvements, people will get to know more about each other than in the past.

I didn’t become active in Facebook until three or four years ago, once I had an appreciation for how many of my global friends routinely post on it, which makes it a great way for me to stay in touch. At first, I was a periodic user and usually I didn’t upload much that was personal in nature. But in recent years I’ve become a bit more relaxed about it and have posted photos of family and the dogs, and shared more about my personal views than I might under normal circumstances. Since there are numerous people on my “Friends” list that I’ve met but don’t know very well (or, in a

¹ Mike Isaac, “Facebook Overhauls News Feed to Focus on What Family and Friends Share,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2018.

few cases, some I've actually never met), this gives them a window into my personal life. We became friends because we share a common interest or a commitment to justice and peacemaking, or because they are associated with colleagues or family members with whom I'm in regular contact. Since nothing nefarious has happened so far, I'll probably continue trusting in the Facebook friends I have.

Facebook and other social media, of course, are part of the ever-evolving, always expanding, "Big Brother" world we live in. George Orwell was right and amazingly prescient for his time, long before the computer chip and internet were commonly imagined. His was a commentary on the reality of government surveillance that used human intelligence to monitor the behavior and comments of fellow citizens, i.e., former Soviet Bloc, China, and other states where secret police were ubiquitous and in control. Nowadays, you could add in the long list of government agencies and marketing interests that routinely monitor the activities of people through the use of electronic surveillance, particularly here in the U.S. Unless you manage to avoid driving a car or paying taxes, or you opt out of online activity, air travel, or cellphone use altogether, it's quite likely Big Brother already knows a lot about you.

However, not everything about our Big Brother world is something to fear. Facebook, for instance, is useful for me in keeping updated in real time with people I've known over the years and with whom I might lose touch, or get to know colleagues beyond the usual "shop talk," or I can keep tabs on certain family members of mine, who might not call me as often as they said they would or tell me what they're up to. I won't dismiss the warnings and risks that come with online activity, as there is a legitimate concern about the misuse of social media. Nevertheless, the benefits

outweigh the worries. Social media is an extraordinary way to know and to be known.

As I see it, we live in a privileged time with digital communications. Previous generations had to contend with geographical distance, which presented a formidable obstacle in maintaining close ties. Frankly, for most of history, the only humans anyone would ever get to know were limited to those in their immediate family or village. Social media has radically changed our private worlds and our sense of identity, by overcoming many of the tribal barriers that come natural to us, such as a preference for race, language, culture, and nationality. In a moment's time, I can transcend much of that by communicating directly with someone in Asia, Africa, Mexico, or Miami, and build a sense of shared community—something rather unique to our generation.

Perhaps, for this reason, we might more easily grasp the perspective and meaning of this ancient psalm—Psalm 139—especially with the level of intimacy and personal knowledge expressed between the psalmist and God. We can appreciate the feeling of knowing another and being known by them, even from a distance. As I mentioned, that certainly wasn't the case for previous generations, who actually experienced much less intimacy and knowledge between people on a personal level. Thus, this psalm expressed something quite extraordinary and even unbelievable.

In ancient Israel, as in most traditional cultures, what would be known about anyone would be restricted, not only by geographical distance, but by social hierarchies and customs that prevented contact between genders or various classes. Typically, men could not speak with women who were outside of the immediate family. Children were completely hidden from sight. Strict hierarchies prevented anything but formal (with

that, callous) relationships between people of different ranks and classes. Even when equals shared, pretense and protocol served as effective masks behind which manipulative power games could be played, where even those of honor might hide their darker selves or their selfish desires or thoughts. Moral hypocrisy had as much to do with established rules and roles, as with a person's ignoble character. So, with all these obstacles to social transparency and intimacy, it was hard to know others and to be known by them, at least in their unvarnished, authentic state.

For that reason, Psalm 139 must have been difficult to imagine as being true to experience—that God would know people so well that there was nothing hidden about a person's life—nothing that would remain a secret. What was thought to be private interior life is an open book for God. This would be a startling claim to make—unheard of, in any practical sense. It would boldly contradict the assumption that one's interior life was closed-off and hidden—unknown, unexamined, and beyond accountability—that the only clue of a person's real intention was their explicit words and deeds.

To those who have something to hide, this presents God like some ultimate “Big Brother,” with all the onerous fear that comes with it. Beware, God knows everything about you—all your thoughts, desires, and sins are being monitored and laid bare. Down through the ages that's been the pulpit-pounding message delivered by preachers to strike the fear of God in people. But, as we read this psalm, it lacks this feel. Instead of God's glaring judgment, there's a sense of reassuring love and intimacy—a private life open to One with whom there is comfort and trust. If there's divine surveillance going on, it isn't presented as something to fear.

It is difficult to say much about the origin of this psalm or even its purpose, as these biblical songs were often composed anonymously, and only ascribed to David or some other prominent name as an imprimatur. In other words, it's unlikely King David wrote this, or that there's a biblical story attached to it which might provide context. Actually, among scholars, Psalm 139 is commonly considered a prayer for vindication to the God of Israel, YHWH, from one who believes he or she is innocent and being falsely charged:

O Lord [YHWH], you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.

It's as if to say, "I am innocent! I am being falsely accused! God is my witness! God knows me and everything about me! YHWH will prove my innocence and protect my integrity!"

That may be, but I'm not quite sure how anyone would expect God to provide that proof in a court of law. In fact, more likely, this has been a convenient cover used by those who are guilty ("I'm not guilty, God knows that!" Or "God is my only judge and God has already forgiven me!"). Whenever I hear religious clichés spouting out of the mouths of prominent or powerful people, I assume they're only using religion to deflect scrutiny of what they've done. The guilty love to claim God as their character witness to avoid accountability.

So, despite the scholars, I think it is more useful to view this psalm as an expression of God's intimate knowledge of the human heart, character, and soul, which is how most of us likely read it. God's unrestricted access and awareness of who we are, what makes us tick, what our underlying motivations or intentions are in each and every situation and circumstance,

is the double-edged sword of divine omniscience. There are no secrets before God, there are no hidden agendas, no unexamined aspects of our lives; we are known completely by the divine Spirit and Power that flows through this universe and in all mortal life.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

But, again, this isn't just about accountability. With awareness that God is everywhere, and knows us through and through, this can be quite comforting for those who do not know what to say when the words don't easily come or when the spirit is so troubled or conflicted that being aware God is fully present with us is enough to quiet the restless heart.

Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord [YHWH], you know it completely.

Granted, God's omniscience is not something we might think about very often. However, it is remarkably important for our spiritual welfare, moral stability, and emotional maturity. A life that is constantly examined—especially one that has a deep awareness of God's presence and knowledge—is one that is open to correction and improvement and less subject to self-deception and arrogance. A well-examined life is one that doesn't hide behind pretense or delusion, or avoid accountability or confession, and won't deflect criticism or strike out irrationally toward others, unlike the unexamined life, which is resistant to scrutiny or accountability—something we often see from those who will act out shamelessly.

As people of faith, constant spiritual examination is a merciful blessing that makes us more self-aware and wise, bringing us into company with God's influencing Spirit, who knows our every strength and weakness. We gain insight on ourselves and guidance in what to say or how to act in

any given situation as we open ourselves before God through meditation, personal reflection, and prayer. It often saves us from unnecessary grief when we pause and explore our real motives, needs, desires, and intentions. The One who knows us more intimately and profoundly than we know ourselves is, as we're told, our spiritual counselor and friend—more knowledgeable than any other.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting [right way].

These words express a divine gift to us more than we sometimes realize. It often is a source of strength to us and a mercy to others, as well.

It was Socrates who said, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” paraphrasing his protege, Plato. Likewise, throughout his teachings, Jesus repeatedly urged his followers to examine underlying thoughts and motivations—to strengthen the integrity of our actions and quell the anger within, before we do harm to others. We've heard this counsel many times from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that...whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister...[or insult them]...you will be liable to judgment...

...if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to [them] and then come and offer your gift.

But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart...

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Abba who is in secret; and your Abba who sees in secret will bless you.

The well-examined life begins by exploring the secrecy of our own thoughts, emotions, and the interior matters of our private selves. We draw upon the Spirit of God to counsel and guide us in the process of going from thought to action. In so doing, we come to know God as we are known by God, with authenticity, humility, and grace.

Like Facebook, intimacy with God is a friendship that supports us through the matters and experiences of life. Likewise, it opens our hearts to a greater awareness and appreciation that anyone in this world can be a friend, regardless of their location or status. Facebook and the Spirit of God are great equalizers for humankind. Intimate friendship is meant to be an open book because of the trust and love shared. So we can embrace and affirm this simple truth of the human spirit: to enjoy such intimacy is a grace and blessing in life—for us, for all, and for the One who knows us best.

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