

Integrative Knowing and Practical Wisdom

Kathleen A. Cahalan

I drove to my aunt's funeral with a heavy heart. The last family funeral I had attended in my family's rural parish was for my cousin's son who died in the Iraq war. It was crushing for so many reasons, but one was the presider. His ministry was ineffective (cool, distant, and unemotional), rule-bound (arguing with the family over their request for popular music outside the liturgical tradition), and rigid (he clung to the book and read the Scripture and prayers in a monotone). Actually the National Guard trumped the church. They sent a caregiver who provided continual help and presence to the family (including meeting the family and the body at the airport and standing with them through hours of visitation); their symbols and rituals were dominant throughout the funeral and burial, and the narrative of the brave soldier had more weight than the gospel.

At my aunt's funeral, I was taken by surprise. The new pastor was pastorally and liturgically in another league than his predecessor. He led the wake service with a brief catechesis, explaining what we could anticipate that night and the next day and leaning into the narrative of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. He led the service with the standard rituals but augmented them with a time for storytelling. The next morning, he met

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the extended family and invited each one of us to come to the casket, offer a prayer, and say goodbye. He then formed us into a line and we processed from the school chapel to the main church, evoking Thomas Long's admonition that Christians accompany their dead all the way to their graves.¹ The burial, a few plots away from our fallen soldier, drew together the baptismal images with our hope in the resurrection. At the luncheon I asked this priest, "Where did you learn to preside like that?" "I try to pray the liturgy," he told me. "And not just read the words from the book."

This tale of two funerals illustrates the integrative work at the heart of ministry, what Robert Hovda describes as "strong, loving, and wise" presence.² How did this priest learn to be this kind of minister?

THE INTELLIGENCE OF PRACTICE

There is an intelligence to practice. It is the knowing that emerges from intentional practice over time. It is multiple in regards to both what one knows and how one comes to know. Yet it is not cumulative but integrative, drawing together how we come to know and that which we know. In philosophical and theological traditions, this kind of intelligence is referenced in many ways: Aristotle's *phronesis*, Aquinas' prudence, Don Browning's practical reason, and the practical wisdom of myself and many colleagues.

For Aristotle, *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue that relates the highest truths and moral telos to everyday actions and decisions, an intelligence that draws insights from many situations in order to judge what to do in a particular instance. *Phronesis* is neither scientific (*episteme*) nor craft (*techne*) knowledge. It is a distinctive kind of integrative knowing, taking account of multiple sources of information and combining them in ways that renders insights into action, information into judgment.³

Similarly, for Aquinas, prudence is the highest moral virtue because it integrates other virtues and comprises eight elements that coalesce in a prudent person who is wise in action. To be prudent and make wise decisions requires drawing upon memory, understanding, and reason; it demands dispositions of docility (learning from others) and shrewdness (learning from one's self); and it exercise the imagination regarding various courses of action and their consequences—what Aquinas called foresight, circumspection, and caution.⁴ This highest moral virtue reckons multiple ways of knowing that combine rational thought with imagination and dispositions toward knowledge.

Scholars of professional education—e.g., Don S. Browning in practical theology, Patricia Benner in nursing, and William Sullivan and Matthew Rosen in higher education—advocate retrieving Aristotle’s practical reason as a distinctive kind of knowing. Practical reason for such thinkers also includes narrative, imagination, discernment, perception, communal wisdom, and moral vision as indispensable aspects of the human knowing that informs intention and action. Hence, it is a deeply integrative way of knowing and living. The value placed on abstract, objective, theoretical knowledge—central to the Enlightenment project and the backbone of higher education—is too limiting. Neither theory nor critical thinking is rejected, but they are not ends in themselves; rather, they are integral to practical knowing. Educators mistakenly conceive of theoretical knowing as the highest knowledge and reject or deem lesser other kinds of knowing.⁵

Why is “the very kind of knowledge that people need to live well—what we call *practical wisdom*—the least understood, the hardest to learn, and often the most devalued kind of knowledge?”⁶ This essay will explore the second question: Why is practical wisdom the hardest kind of knowledge to learn? My answer is that this is because practical wisdom is integrative knowledge that encompasses the full dimensions of human being, knowing, and acting.⁷ In the context of professional education, it requires intentional practice over time with attention to multiple kinds of knowing and learning. In studying practical wisdom and integration in theological education for ministry, I have identified eight ways of knowing that are essential to wise practice:

- *Situated awareness* is noticing and describing contextual factors
- *Embodied realizing* is developing skilled competence in bodily action
- *Conceptual understanding* is comprehending and remembering key information
- *Critical thinking* is analyzing and evaluating concepts and actions
- *Emotional attunement* is identifying and using awareness of feelings and affective states
- *Creative insight* is developing imaginative and creative responses
- *Spiritual discernment* is perceiving what is of God and not of God
- *Practical reasoning* is problem-solving, forming judgments, gaining a sense of salience, and acting wisely

Professional education aims at forming persons who are knowledgeable, skillful, moral, and competent practitioners—a difficult task in any

field.⁸ Yet we know practical wisdom when we see it: “It shows up in a kind of good judgment they are able to put into play in a particular time and place, sometimes as if by second nature. . . [T]hey are engaged, flexible, attuned, and attentive on many levels—cognitively, emotionally, relationally, morally, and spiritually.”⁹ Thus, practical wisdom is not a ninth way of knowing but rather what emerges from the integrating work of drawing together these multiple kinds of knowing. Such learning and knowing take place over time, although the process is not linear or simple; it is not mastering a body of ideas or the interpretation of texts but rather the kind of knowing that emerges from engaged, embodied practice. It develops through what Christian Scharen and Eileen Campbell-Reid call the “long arc of learning ministry,” which is when a leader knows what to do, why to do it, and how to do it for the sake of God’s people.¹⁰

Initially I viewed the first pastor, whom I will call Jamie, as a failed or deficient practitioner until I came to see that he was a novice at funeral ministry.¹¹ To be fair to him, burying a twenty-two-year-old man killed in action is not the same as burying a ninety-year old woman. With more experience combined with opportunities for reflection on practice with mentors and peers, he will have the chance to embody the presence, knowledge, skill, and wisdom that was apparent in the second pastor.

IN THE BEGINNING

Jamie was like many seminarians in his class: bright, with good grades from his undergraduate study, active in church activities, and possessing a felt call to ministry. He was not a novice to ministry since he had participated in church life, but he was a novice in the sense that he lacked practical know-how. Novices are students at the beginning of professional practice. They are not incompetent; rather, they lack the experiential background to know what to do. Novices generally (1) rely on theoretical models, preferring to follow a set of rules or steps; (2) mimic the practice of exemplars; (3) are physically and emotionally self-conscious; and (4) have limited ability to read the dynamics of the context beyond their own actions. Jamie was doing his best to follow the rubrics of the funeral liturgy and read correctly from the book; he was undoubtedly nervous about standing before a crowd of people in this emotionally charged situation and had little experience to help him understand what was happening to the family, town members, media, military personnel, and himself.

In order to learn a skilled practice, beginners begin with parts of a practice. In learning to teach a children's catechetical lesson, for example, beginners need to understand the basic elements of teaching: lesson planning, public speaking, age-appropriate activities, and classroom management. They need basic guidelines in order to carry out each of these parts of teaching. Musically speaking, they must start by learning the basic scales of practice. John Witvleit notes, "As any veteran athlete or musician knows, these drills and scales are a critical part of the work, an activity from which one never graduates."¹²

Practicing a skill repeatedly is important because the actions become inscribed in the body as muscle memory. "Such skills 'literally get sedimented' in the 'embodied know-how' of the mature practitioner."¹³ Expert practice is built upon innumerable hours of habit formation. Novices require intense concentration when practicing, even to the extent that their capacity to talk or to hear advice is severely limited while practicing.

Practicing scales, building muscle memory, and acquiring focused attention are the foundations on which a practitioner can build the scaffolding of practice. Having specific steps to guide their actions helps novices know what to do. Their practice is generally limited and inflexible, but over time these steps become less clunky and artificial and more fluid. Jamie may have only presided at a few funerals, and thus he needed to rely on the book. As Eugene Walsh notes, however, "There is no way for one to think oneself into being a good presider. One has got to get it into one's muscles and bones, just like dancers, actors, and ballplayers."¹⁴ Only through reflective practice over time will Jamie feel the movement of the liturgy as part of his embodied presence. He will become less concerned with following external rules because they will have become more internalized.

Novices also pattern themselves after the actions of exemplars. In their study of how a vocation emerges among ministers, health care workers, and humanitarian workers, Matt Bloom and associates underscore the importance of exemplars in the first stage of discerning a calling. Such exemplars provide people with a living example of someone who embodies a high level of competence as well as personal integrity and a sense of calling.¹⁵ When students engage with an exemplar in practice, they begin what Bloom calls the "mapping" of their identity onto an exemplar, comparing and contrasting themselves to this practitioner. Mapping one's self onto another eventually leads people to be able to imagine themselves as enacting the role.

Jamie may well have had exemplars of ministry, but in this crucial moment he needed to know how a wise pastor would perform this funeral. It might have been better if another pastor had been present that day to help him. Exemplars of practice provide novices with models to follow. Mimicking exemplars is fairly normal for beginners since it takes time and practice to find one's own style.

A beginner has low contextual awareness, emotional attunement, and relational perception of others.¹⁶ Much of Jamie's focus was on his performance. Reflection on that performance is an essential part of learning, but novices often judge their performance by how well they followed the rules. Their critical perspectives widen when they can reflect on their practice with peers with whom they can share their vulnerability, mistakes, and joys.¹⁷ To learn a practice means to "experience the practice, practice it, tell about it, ask questions about it, read about it, write about it, practice it, do it, empower others to do it."¹⁸ The ability to respond in a given situation, strategize what to say, and work with individuals or groups develops over time as novices compare their capacities to basic rules, standards, exemplars, and other novices.

Although novices generally are not highly emotionally attuned toward others, many feel vulnerable, artificial, and even fraudulent in their roles.¹⁹ These emotions are quite normal since the actions and decisions are not yet their own. As Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore writes, "One may feel artificial and forced in making these moves at first, but over time, as one experiments with particular gestures and phrases, practices them over and over, and considers their theological implications, these actions and decisions can become a more reliable and authentic part of one's own pastoral repertoire."²⁰ Jamie's lack of emotional connectedness to the people at the funeral may have stemmed from his feeling inauthentic.

Adult learners learn in "incremental fluctuations," which can be frustrating. They take "two steps forward, one step back, followed by four steps forward, one step back."²¹ Because learning new ideas and skills requires taking on new perspectives, challenging personal and cultural assumptions, and tolerating ambiguity, it is common for novices to vacillate between feelings of failure and moments of exhilaration.

Other features of practical wisdom are limited for novices entering new situations. Most cannot fully read a context because they have a limited ability to imagine different options and their consequences. Thus, novices do not execute a high degree of practical reasoning since they lack the

experience of multiple situations to help them discern what to do. Learning ministry in seminary and the first few years of a call requires a range of experiences in order to build a repository of similar cases on which a practitioner can draw. As Bent Flyvbjerg notes, “Common to all experts is that they operate on the basis of intimate knowledge of several thousand concrete cases in their areas of expertise.”²² Jamie is not going to become better at funeral ministry after a few liturgies; rather, he needs to preside at many in order to build up a repertoire of insights upon which he can later rely.

Regarding spiritual discernment, the tradition has a similar approach to novices as do today’s professional educators; there is a particular kind of knowing that emerges from spiritual practice.²³ After traveling through Egypt and Syria as a novice learning what he could from monastic practitioners, John Cassian (d. 435 CE), then returned to the West to found monasteries in Marseilles. In his two major works, Cassian is writing for new communities embarking on the monastic life and is particularly attentive to beginners.²⁴

One of the key aspects of practical wisdom for Cassian is discernment. In order to learn the way of desert monasticism, novices had to follow some rules. Concerning eating and fasting, the rule that governed choices was not quantity but moderation (e.g., not eating too much or too little). A second kind of discernment that also needed to be learned was the discernment of thoughts, or identifying what is from God and what is not. Cassian wanted to learn how to pray ceaselessly but found that in prayer he was attacked by his own thoughts. In learning to pray, Cassian was taught and passed on a simple practice: If one is prone to afflictive thoughts during prayer or work, replace them with a word or phrase from Scripture. In this way, a scriptural consciousness came to replace the afflictions that plagued monks’ inner life and transformed their ordinary consciousness. Novices learned spiritual practices that shaped body, mind, and heart through repetition, simple actions that focused the mind, gentle encouragement from exemplars, and support in a community of learners.

ADVANCING IN PRACTICE

Ministry students eventually become less reliant on theories, models, and rules as their contextual awareness grows. They gain the ability to recognize elements in situations because they perceive similarities with prior examples. Practice builds intuition; reflection on practice builds judgment.

Students grow in their ability to assess situations and make nascent decisions about how to proceed. Most tend to focus on immediate details, and thus their narratives about a situation can be partial, abstract, or generalized; they may not yet see the whole situation.²⁵

Students need to practice alongside a mentor whose practice they respect. They can both observe and be observed by them in practice. Mentors become dialogue partners, explaining the thinking behind their practice as well as guiding a student in their own performance and skill development. Advanced beginners are practicing “at the border of their own skill,” are continually dependent on others, and may have difficulty understanding where their responsibility lies.²⁶ They act in ways that are largely external to the situation or are guided by factors external to the immediate situation, and may not always feel responsibility for the outcome. “Advanced beginners demonstrate extraordinary dependence on the expertise of others, striving to assert their own independent practice, and continually questioning their capacity to contribute.”²⁷ They define success as the completion of tasks, everything being “okay,” and the fact that they are not failing. At this point failure and mistakes are pivotal to learning. If the learner has a wise guide, missteps can become opportunities for creative insights about alternative courses of action with different consequences. Failure becomes the gateway to greater emotional attunement.

As practitioners assume roles, their identity and sense of calling is shaped by what Matt Bloom and his colleagues term “acknowledgement.” When their skills and knowledge are acknowledged by others in a professional setting, they begin to embrace the responsibilities and expectations of the position. For ministry students this occurs when they preach for the first time, offer counsel, or accompany the dying. Acknowledgement occurs when informants made a psychological commitment to the certainty that there was some distinctive and important work for which they are specially endowed and therefore to which they are called. In acknowledgment, individuals fully accept and affirm to themselves the reality of their call. During acknowledgement, intuitive awareness becomes self-declaration about one’s future.²⁸ Students require affirmation by mentors who confirm their intuitive sense of vocation. When they make their call public, they begin to profess who they are.

Another feature of practical wisdom and emotional maturing is docility—the capacity to learn from others. For example, after several years of ministry, Emily was asked to preside at a funeral for a two-year old. Know-

ing this was beyond her present experience and competence, she called three other pastors whose judgment she respected. These experiences are crucial moments in which either a door into deeper, more reflective practice opens or a person becomes too intimidated and the door to learning closes.

Humor, or the ability to not take oneself too seriously, is another important sign of emotional maturing. For example, as a student pastor in field education in a poor inner-city neighborhood, Heidi B. Neumark created a flyer for a Sunday school program, which she wanted to deliver to every door in a twenty-one-story building. Her supervisor suggested that she wait until someone could accompany her, but Neumark became impatient and headed into the building in August, confidently wearing her "black shirt with its white clerical collar." She got stuck in a stairwell when the electricity went out. When she began sweating profusely, she "pulled out the white collar tab and opened a few buttons," losing her "pastoral identity" in the dark.²⁹ Eventually, some children found her and helped her out of the building. In retrospect, she could see and share the event in a humorous light.

Cassian taught that humility, like discernment, is a virtue that emerges from practice. As the desert monastics practiced moderating their desires and turning their attention toward God, they acquired humility regarding who they were in the sight of God: both sinful and graced. They realized that their attempts to improve their practice and become more competent and skilled largely led to complete failure—similar to the foolishness of human wisdom that Saint Paul wrote about.³⁰ Humility is knowing that one's life and practice is entirely dependent upon God.

In terms of practical reasoning and decision-making ability, advanced beginners are gaining what Benner calls "a sense of salience." They know what to do and when and why to do it, and they can give reasons for their actions. She notes, "Deep background knowledge is the heart of practical reason."³¹ Building up their humility, intuition, and judgment over a thousand cases, the student is learning practical or ministerial reasoning in context.³²

COMPETENCE IN PRACTICE

Over the first ten years, most practitioners become competent as they take on the full identity, role, and responsibility of their profession.³³ They have an array of experiences they deploy in practice as they encounter both familiar and new situations. Over time, conceptual thinking moves to the background as practical thinking moves to the foreground. They do not need

to mimic others as their own style emerges. Competence moves ever closer to practical wisdom when ministers discern the contextually salient features of a situation, are emotionally attuned to themselves and others, can think creatively, are relationally present, and decide how to act in a skilled way.

The third phase in the development of a “called professional” in Bloom’s study is “integration,” in which there is an “integration of self and calling that leads to an identity as a called profession.” Integration involves both competency and authenticity. A sense of competence is gained by knowing that “one is skillful in what one does.” A practitioner can see immediate the positive impact of their work and experience positive emotions during and after situations. Further, the experience of authenticity and integrity emerges as the gap between one’s self and the professional role narrows. Bloom states that “authenticity is the experience of work as an expression of one’s true self and therefore as a life calling.” A person is “no longer playing the role of a professional, they have become a professional.”³⁴ In addition, important people and institutions have endorsed, verified, and validated their work.

Competent ministers are able to predict situations more effectively, discern the salience of possible actions, and put the particulars of a situation in dialogue with what they know. According to Benner, “The competent stage of skill acquisition is typically a time of heightened planning for what are now more predictable immediate futures.”³⁵ The ministers are better able to handle familiar situations and can ponder how to respond to likely events in the near future. They cope in stressful situations by adopting a process of decision-making, evaluating what is most important to act on now and what can be delayed.

Practical reasoning emerges over time. It is akin to problem solving and is a kind of “calculative rationality.” Pastors can feel responsible for and are emotionally involved in their choices, but they can also step back to decide in a more reflective, even detached way. They are emotionally attuned but are not derailed by their own emotions in this difficult ministry. They can experience both joy at effective service and sadness when it does not go as planned.³⁶ Emotions serve to screen and alert practitioners rather than impede; they become informative and trusted guides. As pastors gain insight into their emotions, they can become more emotionally available to others. They embody what Benner calls the “skill of involvement” in appropriate ways.

Competent ministers develop the ability to “think on their feet” as the theoretical material they learned moves into the background and their own experience-based knowledge moves to the fore. Because ministers have increased experience in different contexts, they can more immediately sense the needs and responses of people. They know when breaking the rule is the right thing to do because it serves a larger good—when popular music might be warranted in a funeral even though it breaks with the norms of a tradition.³⁷ Spiritual leaders can think creatively by identifying several options, imagine scenarios for each, and perceive the consequences of different courses of action. Their ministry has evolved beyond understanding theories about becoming a spiritual leader. Pastors move beyond attempts to find the right program and toward authentic interpersonal relating.

Becoming competent in professional practice is a way of being faithful to one’s vocation, gifts, and capacities. According to Roman Catholic theologians Francis Nemeck and Marie Theresa Coombs, the focus of the first half of life is rightly on developing the self: “I must increase so that Christ may increase.”³⁸ They recognize that spiritual growth and development occurs when a person’s sense of self is strong enough that they can surrender their own desires in service to another.

ANOTHER KIND OF COMPETENCE: EXPERTISE OR UNKNOWING?

Expertise in a particular field is not widespread.³⁹ In fact, most practitioners in most professions remain competent in their practice and do not strive for greater skill or knowledge. Furthermore, their domain of expertise is quite particular and not necessarily transferrable to other domains. Thus, being a U.S. Open golf champion does not mean one can become a top-rated baseball player.

Several insights from expertise studies are applicable to ministry. First, expertise requires hours of practice to hone one’s skill, but it also requires taking the time to focus on discrete aspects of one’s practice and become more accomplished in these. For example, if a sermon at a funeral lacked imagination and insight, a pastor could take six months to study funeral preaching, examine what other pastors are doing, and rewrite his or her sermon. Second, experts go back to theory. They learn new ideas, frameworks, and ways of understanding their practice. A pastor might improve by reading recent research on grieving or homiletic theory, both of which have changed since his or her time in seminary. Third, experts learn from

people who are better than they are and accept coaching. A pastor might identify some of the best preachers in the area, observe them, and identify a potential coach. Ironically, experts thus have the ability to go back to the beginning and, in some ways, become a novice again.

The problem with the current state of expertise studies is that the majority are focused on athletes, musicians, professional game players (e.g., chess masters), or scientists. In these cases, the virtues of practice are related to speed, efficiency, accuracy, and often individual effort. But ministers who are expert practitioners require something very different: the ability to slow down and contemplate what God is doing.

The traditions of spiritual practices reveal a dimension of practical wisdom that is quite distinct from expertise studies. Besides discernment and humility, long engagement in spiritual practice also leads to unknowing.⁴⁰ Unknowing is a kind of knowledge that comes from spiritual practice, but it was largely lost in the Christian tradition, becoming a doctrine rather than a practice. At a certain point in the spiritual journey, practitioners recognized that the goal of achieving a loving relationship with God cannot be acquired through more knowledge, as traditionally understood. As the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* teaches, they must leave behind such knowledge to receive and embrace unknowing.⁴¹

Unknowing relates to perceptions we have of the self, the world, and God. We can never know all there is to know, never completely know ourselves, nor ever completely comprehend God. Of course unknowing is acquired through a life of discernment and humility. It becomes a stance in relationship to human knowledge; it is comfortable with ambiguity and doubt and can surrender to the One who cannot be known. This paradoxical knowing is grasped in relinquishing the self that we have constructed. Nemeck and Coombs state that the practitioner's self-awareness shifts (in Christian terms) to the words of John the Baptist, "I must decrease so that Christ may increase." Unknowing is kenotic knowledge; it is the experience of living by way of the imitation of Christ.⁴²

Funeral ministry is one place for witnessing the integrative practical wisdom of the presider and its impact on the community. I recognized such wisdom the day of my aunt's funeral—that presider was cognizant of the situation and emotionally attuned to our loss. He was also able to interpret our experience from biblical and theological perspectives, embody with grace the ritual actions, and be creative and salient in how he led us. He also demonstrated to me spiritual discernment and humility. I was asked to

serve as a Eucharist minister, and when he handed me the plate he asked, “Would you like to give Communion to your family?” My family consisted of quite a large group of people sitting on the left side of the church. I was overcome with joy and grateful for his offer, and he served the few people sitting on the right side of the church.

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- 40 See my discussion of unknowing in Kathleen A. Cahalan, "Unknowing," in Bass et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom*, 302–14.
- 41 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981). The author of *The Cloud* is writing a letter to a twenty-four-year-old disciple who is beginning to learn contemplative prayer.
- 42 Nemeck and Coombs, *The Spiritual Journey*, 41.