

# Do You Lack Discernment Amid Abundance of Information?

Education is more than information.

The late Jean Hendricks, a wise dean in one of Mercer University's academic units, reminded our teaching team of this frequently.

She meant, of course, that while information is essential for living as an informed participant in community, how we think and act based on that information is essential as well.

The traditional distinction between knowledge and wisdom captures this concept, and the partnership of knowledge and insight is well affirmed in both formal and informal educational settings.

Encyclopedic knowledge without the capacity to arrange, evaluate and apply it can lead in conflicting and potentially disastrous directions; and evaluation and application based on limited or no knowledge can be equally harmful.

Our dean's admonition came long before the current proliferation of information made accessible by technology, and I wonder how she would frame her advice now when everyone has the world's knowledge just a few clicks away.

An abundance of knowledge is certainly not a bad thing in itself - who would want to be without its benefits in many areas of life?

But there is a subtle and seductive tendency for us to let factual information take priority in our reflections and discussions of matters that relate to the moral, religious and philosophical dimensions of our life as a human community.

Working in the educational world, it was not uncommon to see a student's response to a question on a particular topic to include pages of information on the

topic without actually responding to the question.

It was sometimes a challenge to help the student see that information on the topic was not the same as a focused and insightful application of that information in response to a specific question.

A level of discernment is required to understand an issue or question and connect appropriate information in the service of a response.

Two prominent episodes in our recent experience have illustrated what seems to be a poverty of discernment in our abundance of information.

The Charlottesville, Virginia, encounter between a white supremacy demonstration and a counter demonstration in opposition to it became a violent confrontation that left one dead and many injured.

Among the many “facts” (pieces of information) that were part of that experience was the knowledge that there were examples of bad behavior on “both sides” of the confrontation.

From that “information” was derived the conclusion of a moral equivalency between affirmations of white supremacy and resistance to those affirmations.

I would suggest that such an equivalency is the result not of a lack of accurate information but of a lack of discernment about the larger context of which the information is a part.

If a civil rights demonstrator in 1963 in Birmingham had kicked one of Bull Connor’s police dogs that was attacking him, a lack of discernment might conclude that because both were violent, there was no difference between the cause of the civil rights demonstration and that of those who sought to subdue it.

More telling in this regard are the more recent expressions of NFL personnel in support of attention to the problem of racially aligned abuse of power in law enforcement.

Responses to their particular action of an alternative response to the national anthem have included such suggestions that because they have been rewarded with wealth, they have no right to be critical of the society that has so favored them.

To be sure, certain arenas of society have provided opportunities for some to gain rich rewards from talent and hard work; and, for the most part, they are thereby shielded from the injustices of a fragmented society.

But to suggest that such privilege disallows its recipients from voicing a concern – even a protest – for aspects of society that cripple and abuse others of basic rights reflects a lack of discernment that is difficult to fathom.

It is like saying a marathon runner who receives a gold medal for his or her performance has no right to protest the abuse and neglect of handicapped children.

Other voices have said it much better, but perhaps it is time (let's hope it's not too late) for us to stop yelling at each other and start listening to each other.

This is a first step toward nurturing the kind of empathy and its consequent discernment that will help us to see beyond the power of knowledge to the wisdom of love and community.

We seem to be closer to the precipice than we have ever been of allowing our need to be right and to protect our particular privileges to take us over the edge of our common humanity into the chaos of disorder.

Discernment seems to be at the heart of what Martin Luther King Jr. had in mind with his words, "We must learn to live together as brothers (and sisters) or we will perish together as fools."

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