An Inherent Good

Philippians 1:6

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I've been reading a beautifully written autobiographical story that my father recommended to me. Written by Rod Dreher, entitled *How Dante Can Save Your Life*, it is about Dante Alighieri's 14th century epic tale about "a lost man who finds his way back to life after walking through the pits of hell, climbing up the mountain of purgatory, and ascending to the heights of heaven," and it is also about the journey of his life (x). Named after his father's initials, Ray Oliver Dreher, Rod was supposed to be a son into whom his father could pour all his formidable knowledge about life in rural Louisiana – the woods, ponds, bayous, swamps, and fields, raising livestock, tilling the soil, fixing cars, playing football, and hunting deer. Rod was supposed to be heir to his father's kingdom. As it turned out, however, Rod was a bookish boy, and his father didn't know how to deal with him. Instead of swamps, he was into stories, and instead of West Feliciana, Louisiana, he was into far-away places like Paris, Moscow, D.C., and New York City. As Dreher describes the gap, he writes that "the world of books and the imagination was more important to me than the mundane world I actually inhabited" (9). Rod was different from his father and from everyone his father ever knew, and even though he knew that his father loved him, he also knew that, in the eyes of his father, different was bad. From the time Rod was a boy and far into his adulthood, Rod wanted nothing more than his father's understanding and approval of who he was. And the stress of not getting it led to angst, depression, confusion, and a stress-related autoimmune disease that, had it persisted, would have dangerously further wrecked his life and family.

In his book, *Far from the Tree*, writer Andrew Solomon brings into focus the universally common phenomenon among families: that "all offspring are startling to their parents." Because children are actually not reproductions of their parents, parents inevitably wonder who their children are. Solomon poses the question this way: How can the apple have fallen so far from the tree? At some point, to some extent, and for different reasons, all parents and children will throw up their hands and ask this question.

To understand this universal phenomenon, Solomon conducted interviews with families in which the traits, conditions, abilities, or identities of children were considered more extremely different from that of their parents. He interviewed parents whose children were disabled, prodigies, deaf, and dwarfs, among others. As unique as each family's experiences were, he included all of them in the same book because he found the children and parents struggling alike to understand what bearing these traits, conditions, or abilities would have on their children's identities. In every case, parents struggled to know whether they were supporting or pushing their child, because there seemed to be "no clear delineation between supporting and pressuring a child, between believing in your child and forcing your child to conform to what you imagine for him" (406). For example, parents of prodigies worried that they would damage their children either "by nurturing their talent at the expense of their personal growth or by cultivating general development at the expense of the special skills that might have given them the deepest fulfillment" (406).

There is pain in not being understood, not being fully known, especially by the person you want most to know you. What we learn from psychologists and doctors is that, while this pain may

be understandable, it is not healthy. When finally Rod Dreher consulted a rheumatologist for his chronic autoimmune disease, the doctor said that its source is almost always deep and constant stress. "Well, you have a choice," he said, "Leave Louisiana, or resign yourself to destroying your health. . . . All I can tell you is that you had better find some way to get inner peace" (33).

Inner peace. How does one go about finding inner peace? What Dreher learns, with the help of a therapist and Dante, was that, if you want to find a way out of the trap you are in, you have to have faith that someone else can see more clearly than you, knows better than you what you need, and can be trusted to show you the way. "To save yourself from your own dark wood," Dreher discovered, "you must first make three acts of faith: affirm that you are lost, affirm that there is a way out, and affirm that there is a God that loves you and will not abandon you in the shadowlands" (63).

Psalm 139 is a meditation on the limits of what we know about ourselves as well as on the all-knowing, limitlessness of God's seeing. The psalmist tries to identify with God's seeing of himself, and in doing so, recognizes the truth that God sees more than we could ever know about ourselves.

O Lord, 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.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

O Lord, you know it completely.

The psalmist goes on to say:

My frame was not hidden from you,

when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written

all the days that were formed for me,

when none of them as yet existed.

That God sees so much more than what we are able to see is what Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin called "surplus seeing." Surplus seeing is that which another person sees about us that we cannot see for ourselves. I cannot see the back of my head or the world behind my back, but another person can. Having lived and worked in an era of Stalinism, in which there was only ever one official point of view, Bakhtin was committed to the idea that we have to rely on others, outsiders, to see things about ourselves that otherwise we would not see. And it is through their eyes that we can learn to see ourselves. This fuller knowledge about ourselves that we receive only from someone other than ourselves is, he thought, a gift.

It is a gift because it is not something we can achieve by our own effort. Perhaps that is why knowing ourselves without the input of others, is the hardest thing. When asked what was the easiest thing, the ancient Greek philosopher Thales replied, "To give advice." When asked what was the most difficult thing, he replied, "To know thyself."

Let's be honest. Gaining self-knowledge through the eyes of others doesn't always feel like a gift. It can be hard to receive, much less welcome, feedback and critique from others. Sometimes, too, other people have skewed perspectives or see things only partially and, therefore, incompletely. And it can be painful to be mistakenly perceived or misunderstood.

It is God alone who has omnipresent perspective, the perspective that spans all time and space. No amount of time, distance, or darkness will allow anything to be hidden from God. God knows us truly and completely. This is supposed to be a gift – a gift of both comfort and challenge. Though it may be profoundly comforting to know that God sees us, even if it seems that we are invisible to the world, or that God knows our heart and understands our intentions when it seems that the world misunderstands us, there are other times when we may feel hemmed in, with God behind and before us, knowing even those things that we would rather not acknowledge about ourselves, much less let the world see.

The knowledge we gain about ourselves because God sees and knows us is a gift. More than any parent, God knows that we were fearfully and wonderfully made. God knows that we were made in God's image. What if we were always to be made aware of this, to be reminded of this? Would this not be a gift? What if we were taught that what matters most is not what the world sees, but what God sees?

A few months after I moved here to begin ministry at SPC, the husband of my good friend called. My friend's cancer had returned, and he wondered if I could come to Chicago for a visit. She was near the end, he said. So, I went back to see my friend a final time. My friend and her husband had a little girl, 8 years old. So, at her bedside I wanted to make all kinds of promises that I would be there for her daughter as she grew up, but I knew better. I knew that this wasn't a time for my friend to hear promises from me, promises that I may or may not have been able to keep. It was time for her to place her trust in God and God's promises. God, I knew, could keep a promise always to watch out for her daughter, always to see her as she truly is, always to know her fully, and always to love her. No matter what, God would be the one in whom my friend Laura and all of us could trust to know and love her daughter as the precious person she was created to be. So, I sang at my friend's bedside the song from our hymnal we will be singing next – "I Was There to Hear Your Bourning Cry." Like the psalmist who tries to identify with God's knowledge of each of us, through the voice of this song, we too can try to identify with God's promise to us that at our birth and at every stage in our lives, from beginning to end, God will be with us, knowing us, and loving us.