

Series:

[When the Heart Ripens](#) – and life turns spacious

This Episode: F2: WISE –

Trust that no longer needs answers

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We may spend years waiting for God to explain the road behind us, or the road ahead. Sometimes the explanation never comes. Yet something else may happen: the need for an explanation loosens, and the unanswered question itself becomes spacious.

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SURRENDERED – Letting go of image and role; Freedom from the need to win; The shift from willpower to willingness; Reconciliation with one's limits; Beyond fear of failure.

SHADOW – Shadow faced, shadow integrated; Ripeness through vulnerability; Compassion widened by suffering; Joy that has suffered enough to be gentle.

MYSTERY – Living at ease with paradox; From certainty to Mystery; Deep trust amid unknowing.

WISE – The quiet authority of humility.

Story:



The road that did not explain itself

By four o'clock the sun had moved behind the neighbour's wall, and the small courtyard had begun to cool.

Miriam was kneeling beside a cardboard box on the tiled floor, separating papers into three piles: keep, recycle, and ask someone else. The labels were written on torn pieces of masking tape.

Along the wall, rosemary had grown woody and uneven, pushing out as grey-green sprays over the edge of its pot. A climbing jasmine had found its own way through a gap in the trellis and was flowering where no one had trained it. The light caught the white petals briefly, then moved on.

Daniel sat opposite her with a photograph in his hand. There were seven people in it, standing outside a low stone building with blue shutters. Miriam was younger by perhaps twenty years. She wore a linen shirt and had one hand raised against the sun.

"Tell me more about what this place was."

"A house in Rabat."

"A retreat place?"

“Retreats, courses, meals, sometimes somebody just needing somewhere quiet for two days.”

“You ran it?”

Miriam shook her head.

“We all ran it badly together.”

Daniel laughed.

“You make everything sound accidental.”

“A great deal of it was.”

He turned the photograph over. Someone had written a date in blue ink.

“You were there a long time.”

“Fourteen years.”

“And then it just closed?”

“More or less.”

“Why?”

Miriam placed a folder into the recycling pile.

“Money. People leaving. Two bad decisions. One very generous donor dying at the wrong time.”

“The wrong time for you.”

“The right time for him, presumably.”

Daniel smiled, then looked again at the photograph.

A light breeze moved through the courtyard and lifted one corner of a paper lying between them. Miriam put a small terracotta saucer on it to keep it from blowing away. Beyond the wall, someone was watering plants; the faint smell of wet stone came across with the air.

He had come because he wanted to talk about Glasgow.

There was a job there. Better pay. More responsibility. A church community he liked. He had spent six months trying to decide whether taking it would be an act of trust or an act of escape.

Miriam knew this because he had told her three times already.

He picked up another envelope.

“Did you think the house was your vocation?”

“Yes.”

“And when it closed?”

“For a while I thought I had misunderstood everything.”

Daniel stopped sorting.

“That’s what frightens me.”

Miriam looked up.

“What?”

“That you can pray and listen and think you’re following God and still get it wrong.”

The old answer rose almost automatically.

She could have told him about discernment, mixed motives, freedom, grace working through mistakes. She had given versions of that answer before, sometimes to other people, sometimes to herself.

For years she had needed the ending of the house to mean something.

She had called it purification once. Another year she had called it redirection. For a while she had decided that its failure had been necessary because otherwise she would have become too attached to the work. All of

these explanations had contained some truth. None had stayed.

Daniel was still waiting.

Miriam picked up a photograph of the old kitchen. Three people were crowded around the sink. Someone had written ‘Christmas soup’ on the back.

She smiled.

“Did you ever find out why God led you that way?” Daniel asked.

“No.”

A smile.

Daniel stared at her.

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“It did.”

“For how long?”

“Quite a long time.”

“And now?”

Miriam looked towards the rosemary growing against the wall. One branch had bent down almost to the paving. She had meant to cut it back in spring, then had forgotten. It did not seem particularly troubled by this.

“Now I think I was asking the question in the wrong way.”

“What was the right way?”

“I’m not sure there is one.”

He laughed softly.

“That is not very helpful.”

“No.”



She handed him the kitchen photograph.

“Keep?”

He looked at it.

“Yes.”

They worked for a minute without speaking.

The light had thinned to a softer gold. Dust showed briefly in the air when Daniel moved one of the folders. A blackbird landed on the wall, tilted its head towards them, then dropped into the neighbour’s garden and disappeared.

Miriam felt the old machinery somewhere at the edge of her mind. It was still available if she wanted it: reasons, patterns, possible intentions of God, lessons learned later.

But there was no pull towards it.

The years at the house had been real. The people had been real. Some had been helped. Some had not. She had made mistakes there. She had loved the place. It had ended.

What all of that meant in God was larger than anything she could now arrange into a sentence.

Daniel broke the silence.

“So how do you know you didn’t waste fourteen years?”

Miriam considered this.

“I don’t.”

He frowned.

“But you don’t look as if you regret it.”

“I don’t.”

“Why?”

She rested her hands on her knees.

“Because I’m not sure anymore that my life has to explain itself to me.”

He said nothing.

Miriam could see that he wanted another sentence. She almost wanted one too. Instead she leaned back against the chair behind her. Somewhere beyond the wall a dog barked twice and stopped.

Daniel turned the photograph over again.

“So with Glasgow...”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re really not helping today.”

“I know.”

This time they both laughed.

Then Miriam said, “You still have to decide.”

“That’s the problem.”

“Yes.”

“And pray?”

“Yes.”

“And think?”

“Of course.”

“And after all that, I still might not know whether it was God.”

Miriam looked at him.

“You might not.”

He lowered his eyes to the photograph.

For a while they sat there with the box between them.

The courtyard had almost lost the sun now. Only the top of the wall and the jasmine still held it. The white flowers seemed brighter for being the last things touched by light.

Then Daniel reached for the next bundle of papers.

“Keep, recycle, or ask someone else?”

Miriam smiled.

“Ask someone else.”

He placed it in the third pile.

Nothing had become clearer. And somehow the courtyard felt larger.

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Reflection



Trust that no longer needs answers

For much of our lives, we may carry an unspoken expectation that things will eventually make sense.

Perhaps not immediately. We know life is complicated. We know that prayer does not produce instant answers. Still, somewhere within us there may remain a hope that, looking back, we shall finally see the pattern. The difficult years will reveal their purpose. The closed door will explain itself. What once seemed like failure will find its proper place in the story.

Sometimes this happens. Sometimes it does not.

There are roads we travel sincerely, prayerfully, with as much honesty as we can manage, whose meaning never becomes clear. There are choices about which we may never know whether we discerned well. There are

prayers whose silence remains silence. There are losses for which no later insight provides an adequate explanation.

The question then becomes deeper than Why did this happen? It may become: Can I remain in relationship with God when I do not know what God is doing with this?

Thomas Merton's well-known prayer in *Thoughts in Solitude* begins from precisely such a place. "I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me..." He cannot see the road ahead. He cannot know where it will end. More radically still, he admits that believing himself to be following God's will does not guarantee that he actually is. Yet the prayer moves towards trust: God may lead him "by the right road, though I may know nothing about it."

There is something liberating in that admission. The small self would rather possess the map. It would like to know that its choices were correct, its suffering meaningful, its prayers effective and its interpretation of God reliable. Even spiritual life can become another field in which the self seeks reassurance that it has understood correctly.

But God is not an object within the small self's field of vision. Whatever we truly mean by God must exceed the mind that asks the

question. This does not make thought useless. Nor does it make discernment unnecessary. We still think, pray, seek counsel, examine our motives, learn from experience and make decisions. Miriam was right to tell Daniel that he still had to decide.

What begins to loosen is something subtler: the assumption that faithful discernment must eventually be rewarded with explanatory certainty.

Perhaps we chose well. Perhaps badly. Perhaps motives were mixed, as human motives usually are. Grace may have been at work through all of it in ways we cannot isolate from our own freedom, blindness, generosity and mistakes.

A ripened heart can increasingly allow this complexity to remain unresolved.

This is not resignation. Nor is it a refusal to ask questions. The question may remain alive for years. What changes is the authority we give it.

At first the unanswered question may seem to stand between ourselves and God. We wait for the explanation that will restore trust.

Later, something unexpected may occur. We discover that God need not explain Godself before relationship can continue.

The mystery itself becomes more spacious.

That spaciousness can even contain a strange kind of gratitude. Not gratitude for suffering as suffering, nor for confusion simply because it is confusing. Rather, gratitude that reality is larger than the meanings we can impose upon it. Gratitude that God need not fit inside our interpretation of God.

This is one reason the apophatic tradition has spoken so persistently of unknowing. Its deepest concern is not ignorance. It is freedom from mistaking what the mind can grasp for the whole of Reality.

There are things we know about God through Scripture, tradition, experience, reason and community. Yet every genuine knowledge of God also approaches a boundary. Beyond that boundary, further accumulation of explanations may not take us deeper.

Love may. Trust may. Silence may. And surrender may.

Over time the unanswered question can change its character. Once it demanded: What does this mean? Why did God permit this? Was I right? Was I wrong?

The same questions may still visit us. But they no longer necessarily require an answer

before life can continue. We may even smile. Not because the question was trivial. Because it no longer holds us captive.

Miriam's years at the house remained real. The people were real. The help given was real. Her mistakes were real. Her love for the place was real. Its ending was real. None of these needed to be converted into a final theory of providence.

Perhaps this is one form of wisdom: allowing what has been lived to remain fully itself without forcing it to explain God.

And something similar may happen with the road ahead. We pray. We listen. We choose as honestly as we can. Then we walk without possessing the ending.

The road may eventually make sense. It may not. But relationship with God need not wait.

The heart can remain open before what it cannot comprehend. And, slowly, what once felt like an absence of answer may reveal another kind of presence – the spaciousness in which the small self no longer has to know everything in order to trust.

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Meet the Witnesses



These witnesses do not all say the same thing, nor should they be made to. Together they illuminate different aspects of a heart that remains faithful when explanation falls away: trust without a map, prayer without self-verification, faith without false closure, responsible action without possession of outcomes, and the contemplative willingness to let mystery remain mystery.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968)

Merton stands near the centre of this article because his prayer in *Thoughts in Solitude* gives unusually direct language to spiritual unknowing. He does not merely lack information about the future. He admits that he cannot see the road, cannot know where it will end, does not fully know himself, and cannot be certain that what he takes to be God's will really is God's will.

Yet the prayer does not collapse into indecision. Its movement is towards trust: "you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it." Merton's confidence lies less in his capacity to read the divine plan than in the relationship itself. The road may remain hidden. And that may be OK.

This also helps expose a subtle spiritual temptation. The small self can turn discernment into a demand for certainty about itself: Did I choose correctly? Did I understand God? Was this really my vocation? Merton does not solve that problem by perfecting self-knowledge. He relinquishes the requirement that his trust depend upon it.

Ruth Burrows OCD (1923–2023)

pen name of Sister Rachel Gregory, O.C.D. She was an enclosed Carmelite nun of Quidenham, Norfolk, for over 75 years. She shifts the emphasis from the road we cannot read to the prayer we cannot measure. Across her writing on contemplative prayer, she repeatedly resists the assumption that the reality of God's action can be judged by the quality of our experience. Consolation, interior clarity and a sense of spiritual success may come or go; they do not give us possession of what God is doing.

Her contribution is important here because the need for answers can take a distinctly spiritual form. We may want reassurance that prayer is working, that we are progressing, that surrender has produced the right interior state. Burrows directs attention away from this self-monitoring. The life of prayer rests more deeply in God's initiative than in our ability to verify it.

Christian Wiman (1966–)

Christian Wiman brings a different voice: that of a contemporary poet and believer whose writing remains in sustained contact with doubt, illness,

mortality and the inadequacy of religious language. He does not treat faith as the disappearance of uncertainty, nor uncertainty as a failure of faith.

For the present article, Wiman helps preserve the honesty of the unanswered question. A mature trust need not manufacture a pious solution to what remains unresolved. Faith can coexist with intellectual incompleteness and emotional difficulty without either side being falsified. The mystery is allowed to remain alive rather than being converted into a reassuring formula.

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961)

Dag Hammarskjöld adds another necessary dimension: action. His private spiritual journal, *Markings*, reveals a person trying to live from surrender while carrying unusually heavy public responsibility as Secretary to the U.N. He could not wait for complete knowledge before acting, nor could he possess the consequences of his decisions.

His witness guards this article against confusing unknowing with passivity. To relinquish the need to control the whole meaning of events is not to relinquish the responsibility of the present moment. One may act carefully, courageously and provisionally while leaving the larger pattern beyond one's grasp.

Kaira Jewel Lingo (c. 1974–)

Kaira Jewel Lingo, a Buddhist teacher in the Plum Village tradition, offers a useful interfaith resonance. Her work on uncertainty, change and disruption

describes the movement from forcing resolution towards embodied presence: staying with what is here, loosening the grip of the mind that wants immediate certainty, and becoming available to what the next moment actually asks.

Her theological framework is not the Christian framework of providence, grace or relationship with God, and that difference should remain visible. Her contribution is phenomenological: she helps clarify what release from the compulsion for closure can feel like in lived experience.

The apophatic lineage

Behind these modern witnesses stands the older Christian apophatic tradition, especially *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It does not teach that nothing can be known of God. It teaches that God cannot be contained by what the mind can know. True concepts remain true, but they do not become possession-by-knowing.

This is why the cloud is not an obstacle awaiting removal. It can become the very place of loving attention. The spiritual movement is not towards intellectual vacancy but towards a form of knowing that has surrendered mastery. It is the small self that wants to be in charge. In that sense, unknowing can eventually be welcomed: not because obscurity is valuable in itself, but because the heart is being freed from requiring God to fit within the small self's field of comprehension.

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Discernment Box



When unknowing is – and is not – trust

There are ways of living with uncertainty that can outwardly resemble contemplative unknowing while arising from quite different places within us. The distinctions below indicate such lookalike states. They are not tests of spiritual maturity. They are ways of noticing what may actually be happening in the heart.

A person may say, “I don’t know,” because they have relinquished the need to master what cannot be mastered. But the same words can also arise from discouragement, avoidance, fear of choosing, or simple unwillingness to think further.

Contemplative unknowing does not ask us to know less than we reasonably can. It asks us not to pretend that what we can know is the whole.

We may therefore notice some of these differences.

Unknowing or avoidance? Sometimes a question genuinely exceeds us. At other times, calling something “mystery” can protect us from

information we would rather not face. Mature unknowing remains willing to learn, to be corrected and to look again. It does not use God’s mystery as shelter from an uncomfortable fact.

Unknowing or indecision? Not knowing the whole road does not mean refusing to take the next step. Daniel still has to decide about Glasgow. Prayer, thought, counsel, prudence and responsibility remain necessary even when certainty does not come. The mature heart can make a real choice without demanding a guarantee from God beforehand.

Unknowing or passivity? Surrender is not waiting for God to do what is ours to do. We may not know what an illness, loss, relationship or vocation means in the larger pattern, yet there may still be something immediate that love requires of us. Trust can coexist with vigorous action.

Unknowing or resignation? Resignation tends to close the future: There is nothing more to be hoped for. Contemplative unknowing leaves the future open. It may say instead: I cannot see what this will become. The absence of an explanation need not become the absence of expectancy.

Unknowing or emotional shutdown? A person may trust God and still be confused, frightened, angry or deeply sad. Serenity is not the required evidence of surrender. Sometimes trust consists simply in allowing grief and relationship with God to remain in the same room.

Unknowing or premature explanation? The impulse to make suffering meaningful can be very

strong. We may say that something “had to happen”, that God “sent it to teach us”, or that everything occurred according to a discernible plan. Such interpretations may occasionally contain truth. They may also close a mystery too quickly. A ripened heart becomes increasingly reluctant to claim knowledge of God’s motives where none has actually been given.

Unknowing or spiritual self-doubt? There is a difference between humility and endlessly suspecting our own spiritual judgement. Merton could acknowledge that he might be wrong about God’s will without becoming paralysed by that possibility. Trust does not require certainty about ourselves any more than it requires certainty about the road.

Unknowing or the need for reassurance? We naturally welcome moments when things become clear. Consolation, insight, confirmation and a sense of direction can all be gifts. The difficulty begins when they become conditions: I can trust only if I receive a sign; I can continue only if I understand what God is doing. Ripeness may be recognised in the gradual loosening of that bargain.

Unknowing or measuring our spiritual progress? The small self can turn even contemplation into a project. We may ask whether prayer is deepening, whether surrender is “working”, whether we are becoming more spiritually mature. Such questions are not always useless. But they can also keep the self anxiously at the centre of its own spiritual life. Sometimes growth becomes more possible when



we stop requiring continual evidence that growth is occurring.

Unknowning or relativism? To say that God exceeds our concepts does not mean that every belief about God is equally true. The apophatic tradition does not discard theology, Scripture, reason or discernment. It reminds us that even our truest language about God points beyond itself. Mystery does not make truth irrelevant; it prevents truth from becoming possession.

Unknowning or despair? Despair says that there is nothing and no one to trust. Contemplative unknowing is different. The explanation may be absent, but relationship remains. The road is hidden, yet one continues to walk with openness to God.

Perhaps the most revealing distinction is therefore not between having answers and lacking them. It is between the different ways we inhabit their absence.

The question may still matter intensely. We may continue to seek whatever can honestly be known. But somewhere, gradually, another freedom can appear: the unanswered question no longer has to stand between ourselves and God. It may mark a new spaciousness.

And perhaps, like Miriam, we may even smile.

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Practice Box



Staying with what you do not know

These practices are not meant to produce a ripened heart. That kind of ripening comes through grace, time, relationship, suffering, love, failure, fidelity and the long work of life.

They may, however, help you notice some of the inner movements involved when the need for answers begins to loosen.

You might try one or two of these, lightly.

- 1. Notice the moment when the mind starts demanding an explanation.** You may feel it as tightening, repetition, impatience, or the urge to settle on a meaning quickly. Simply notice: I am wanting this to become clear.
- 2. Let the wish to know remain.** You do not have to suppress it or pretend to be spiritually detached. The desire for clarity is human. See what happens if

you allow the desire to be present without letting it take over.

3. Ask what is actually unknown. Sometimes everything feels uncertain when only one part is. You may know what happened, what you feel, and what you need to do next, while still not knowing what it means in God.

4. Try saying, quietly, “I do not know”. Not as defeat. Not as a slogan. Simply as a truthful sentence. Notice whether anything in you relaxes when you stop trying to complete the picture.

5. Notice whether you are asking God for guidance or for guarantees. The two can feel very similar. Guidance, if it comes, may still leave you free, vulnerable and without certainty about the outcome.

6. Return to what is yours to do. You may not know where the road leads. You can still ask: What is the next honest, loving, responsible thing before me?

7. Let prayer become simpler. If you find yourself repeatedly trying to obtain an explanation, you might rest for a while in a shorter prayer: Here I am. Or: I am listening. Or simply remain silent.

8. Notice the urge to measure your spiritual state. You may wonder whether you are trusting enough, surrendering enough, or “progressing”. See whether that question itself needs to be answered just now.

9. Allow mystery to remain larger than your interpretation of it. You may have a strong

explanation for what God is doing. Hold it gently. It may contain truth without containing the whole.

10. Notice whether the unknown has any spaciousness in it. Not pleasure, necessarily. Not relief. Perhaps only a little more room. A sense that you do not have to solve everything before you can remain present, faithful or in relationship with God.

For a group

One simple question may be enough:

Can you remember a time when an unanswered question became less threatening or less immobilising, even though it remained unanswered?

There is no need to resolve the question together. The value may lie simply in noticing how differently an unknown can be carried.

Invitation

Is there an unanswered question you have been carrying as though your trust depended on resolving it?

You need not force it away, and you need not turn it into a spiritual lesson. You might simply notice whether there is room to hold it differently – still honestly, still responsibly, but without requiring it to explain God.

Perhaps, for now, the question can remain a question. And perhaps relationship can remain.

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