

Reconstructing a “House of Knowledge”

BY **DEBBIE WOOD**

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It was after midnight when she finally heard the gate open. Flora Mwikali dragged herself wearily from the comfort of her cot and started toward the light from the lounge. The matron, Mummy, was already there. Suddenly the guard called, “They are too afraid. You must come, Ma’am.” As Flora peered into the van, she could see the eyes of two children gleaming like small white crescents. The woman officer was trying to coax them, but they cringed and trembled, straining away. They were so small, Flora thought. Maybe age five or six? Or maybe they were just malnourished, like so many others before them. She already had welcomed over 60 such small faces as the two she could suddenly smell on the night breeze. She motioned for the guard to make his rounds. With no men looking at them, like wounded animals the children clambered down and into the lighted room.

“This one we found sleeping buried up to her neck in the roadside repair sand,” the officer summarized as she handed Flora the paperwork. “It kept her from being troubled all night. This other one in the market dustbin, eating garbage after everyone went home.” The girls looked down as Flora read the unfeeling report “...checked at the hospital.” The officer went on. “No infections, but they have been... damaged.” She shook her head sadly as she accepted the signed paper. After she was gone, Flora knelt down, examining their small faces, not letting herself pull away from their stench. “Do you want to tell about yourselves?” The girls remained silent. “Here you will be safe. You will have sisters to play with, and can go to school. Would you like that?” She thought she detected a slight nod, and they had stopped trembling and were listening now. “This is a towel. Mummy here will help you bathe. All the girls here at New Scent are clean. She will



help you dress in new clothes of your very own. I will make you food and prepare your bed. Tomorrow you can rest for as long as you want. Then, other girls would like to meet you.”

She knew that they did not understand some of her words. Most girls had never touched a towel or had a bath in their short lives. As she watched them walk to the shower house with Mummy, she wondered again, why did they just keep coming? In Kenya, where nearly 80% claimed Christ, how could men violate childish bodies with impunity? Why were the girls then treated like the garbage they often hid in?

These girls would soon find new dignity in Christ. They would learn to pray with the others and experience God providing food (without exacting pain). Someone would deliver a sack of meal or a bag of rice to the gate. But like manna, there was rarely surplus. Flora thought of the last church elder to whom she had shared her difficulty feeding 60 children. “If you would just take in ordinary orphans, then our church could help,” he had said, “but these are so dirtified...” his lip curled with the word. His disgust matched countless rejections over the seven years since God brought the first molested child to her doorstep.

“I have experienced equal measures of love and hate from Your people, Lord. What’s wrong?” Flora prayed as she heated the mush. “The leaders know Your Word. Why do they not love and value children you say are made in Your image?”

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Experiences like Flora’s are not rare. Christian workers in every culture bruise themselves on implacable boulders hidden like deadly reefs in leaders’ worldviews. They wonder, why is the perspective of the Church and its leaders so contrary to a clear teaching of Scripture? Why isn’t the Scripture affecting these hidden stones?

The answer lies in assumptions founded in each individual’s “House of Knowledge,” a helpful visualization of the human mind and heart (which I am constantly renovating) to illustrate learning and teaching.

What is the House of Knowledge?

In Proverbs 9:1, The writer describes Lady Wisdom building a house. In a similar way, each person builds an inner house of everything believed to be true. This House of Knowledge (HOK) is a helpful (but admittedly imperfect) way of picturing the structure of your mind, everything you believe, understand, or judge about everything you have encountered—your own “wisdom.” The blocks that make up your HOK are organized by topics of all sorts, from geography, the names and appearance of your family and friends, ways of appropriate behavior in your culture, to beliefs about yourself and your worth. They are not discrete, but clusters of information, with cross-referenced connections threaded to each other.

The heart reigns at the center of the HOK. In biblical thought, the heart is not seen primarily as the location of emotions, as in Western thought. It is much more than that. The heart is the center of will, choice, personality, subconscious. It refers to who you are deep inside and regulates how you choose, respond, or initiate. Proverbs 4:23 says to “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”

How does the House of Knowledge Start? With Caregivers

A baby is born knowing nothing, right? No, at birth, the baby has already learned comfort, hunger, pain, fear and the sound of the family’s voices from inside the womb. These impressions are the first stones supporting his/her tiny house of limited knowledge. But when the baby is jettisoned into the world at birth, it is like arriving on an alien planet. Life is going on, and she is urgently trying to make sense of this new world and how she fits into it. For this, the Lord has instilled in babies several essential skills and senses. She immediately goes to work recording impressions, and seeking to connect them with other impressions, then to extract meaning from the data. She notes who attends to her needs and what her caregiver’s reactions tell her about her own value. Within a few short weeks, social smiles bounce back and forth between the baby and the parents, or neglect produces insecurity. As the impressions grow, the house structure expands and the world comes into focus.

The parents aren’t the only ones giving the child input about the nature of life. Brothers and sisters, aunts and

cousins and other caregivers are just a few of the people who give the baby data for the quest. Because we live in a world where sin, Satan and the world system are distorted and seeking to distort, some of the blocks the child builds into the house are also distorted. Sisters and brothers may say “I wish you’d never been born.” The child cannot reject these early impressions, any more than she can reject the name his parents call her. It is a one-way absorption. For many years of development, the foundation stones will embed so deeply under the soil of the maturing individual’s “house,” that they will rarely, if ever, be considered again. Language, culture, experimentation and impressions about her own body all form new blocks.



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How does the House Grow? The Elevator, Greater Complexity, and Judgments

Each person’s House of Knowledge is a totally private place, humanly speaking. As a Christian discipler, you do not know what is really inside someone else’s house. It may even have been a long time since you explored the lower reaches of your own HOK. Your only access to your learner’s house is the “elevator shaft” that we can imagine extending from outside down through the core of the house. This elevator ferries information bundles down into the house. As data arrives, the mind instantly works

to decode the new bundle, combing existing storerooms of blocks for something with similar features—somewhat like a domino player examines a new tile for a matching dot pattern. There are only a few seconds available for this process. If there is no match, the data disappears back up the shaft. For example, if I see a Japanese Kanji character, it takes only a split second for me to realize I do not know enough to decode it.

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If new data finds some commonality with an existing block, the mind goes to work interpreting the new knowledge based on the previously stored data. If congruent, the new information attaches to the old. The upgraded block goes back into long-term memory, which grows that much bigger and more complex. So, the child’s blocks develop greater complexity. For instance, the “bird” block now includes species, “crow, sparrow, seagull” as well as bird noises, bird physiology and bird habits. This complexity gives that much more opportunities to find matches whenever new information



arrives in the elevator. Greater expertise in any topic and wider experience types means faster and easier absorption of new “bundles.”

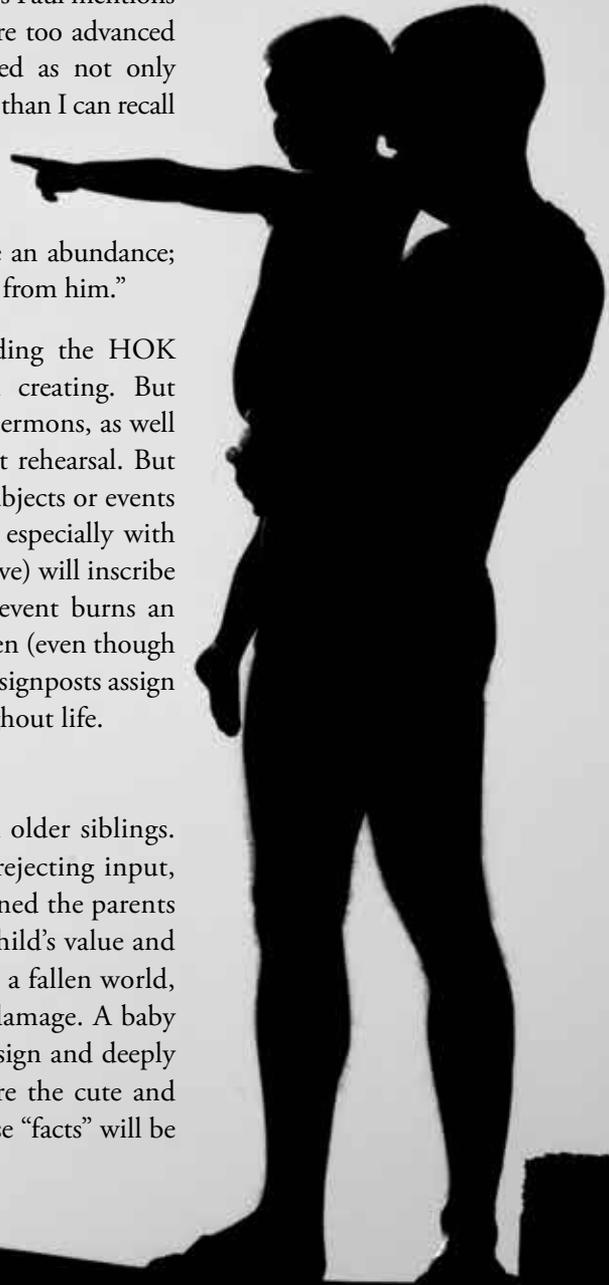
Conversely, failures to learn rudimentary principles or make key observations cause new bundles to be misunderstood. Like the tongues-speakers Paul mentions in 1 Cor 14:11, if concepts arrive in unknown vocabulary, or are too advanced for the child’s current development, the new data is discarded as not only unintelligible, but are actually *unable* to be remembered any more than I can recall my unintelligible Kanji. Jesus actually describes a similar principle in Matt. 11:13 when speaking about the contrast between His disciples’ understanding and the confused crowds.

“For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.”

The school-age child experiences disciplined ways of expanding the HOK through listening, writing, reading, testing, rehearsing and creating. But mental paths to locate specific facts from textbooks, tests, and sermons, as well as memories about specific experiences, will weed over without rehearsal. But signposted judgments such as “good” or “keep out” on many subjects or events will remain to inform future bundles. Emotional experiences, especially with significant people exhibiting strong emotions (positive or negative) will inscribe the most deep, influential judgments. However, a traumatic event burns an access path so vividly that the event data itself cannot be forgotten (even though in PTSD or dissociative disorders, it may be sequestered). These signposts assign meaning to the data and will continue to exert influence throughout life.

Good Processes Can Produce Bad Results

A child comes equipped with a *disposition to trust* adults and older siblings. A child is not naturally skeptical, not good at discerning or rejecting input, as easily as they might spit out bitter food. Because God designed the parents to represent God to the child, the parents’ verdict about the child’s value and the way the world works is absorbed without question. But in a fallen world, this makes them vulnerable to deceit and lasting emotional damage. A baby can’t say “You should not treat me as worthless! I am God’s design and deeply loved!” If a mother says “Your brother is the smart one, you’re the cute and pretty one,” or father hisses, “Your birth brought bad luck,” these “facts” will be deeply believed.



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Whenever a parent's actions differ from his instructions, the child, in the long run, will typically imitate. "Do what I say, not what I do" is useless. This makes sense because humans were created as God's image-bearers, designed to replicate His image to their children. Offspring become natural image-bearers of parents, both physically from genetics and caught from behavior. The problem of course, is that once again, children have only poor replicas of God to imitate! Yet Paul invited the infantile Corinthians to imitate him as *He modeled Christ* (1 Cor. 11:1; 4:16). This exhortation should keep us as teachers and parents humbly walking in the fruit of the Spirit, so that God can image Christ through us. Then those we seek to disciple can safely imitate our walk.

The Right to Reign

Through the process of maturing, a child begins to exercise an ability God instilled in all humans—the right to reign (Gen. 1:26). This includes a right to reject as well as accept. The child might say "I don't like red curry but I do like bananas." The cluster about bananas gets signposted with others as "foods I like" and the curry information gets judged "foods I don't like." The child learns to exercise an ability to say "No!" as well as to comply, to complain as well as feel satisfied.

Rather than accepting everything, the child learns to compare old and new information, remodeling or replacing deficient blocks. The heart instinctively knows it has this right. While this function can be just as flawed as the others in a fallen world, this ability to discern and choose is crucial to protecting the learner's HOK from false and dangerous bundles.



One of my students, a pastor's daughter, shared about an encounter in her church while she was still preschool-aged. As she blithely walked down a corridor, an elder suddenly blocked her way. "Why are you wearing black clothing?" he hissed. "Are you *the devil's* child? *God* does not approve of your black dress!" Surprising for her age, Jennifer did not collapse in fear or tears. Instead, she squared her shoulders and responded indignantly, "No, I belong to Jesus. My God cares about what is in my heart, *not* what I am wearing!"

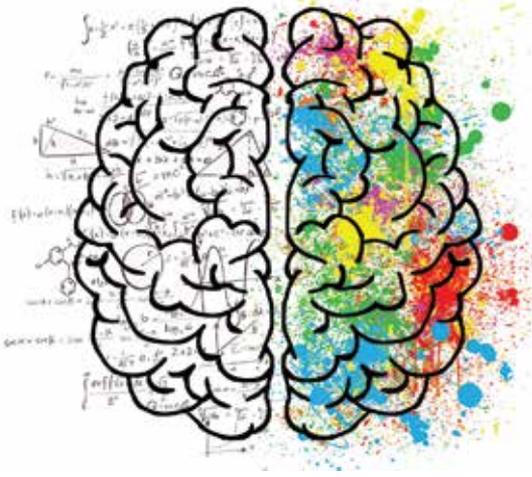
We can see from, not only her truthful words, but her ability to contradict a powerful adult at a young age, that her parents had laid a formidable block of biblical truth in her young heart that protected her from a deep wound (Ps. 57:4; Eph. 6:16). She was shaken by the encounter (and still remembers it vividly today, decades later) but she successfully jettisoned the lie arriving on her elevator and reigned over the attack.

When a new bundle's comparison to existing blocks produces not a "no match" (like my Kanji) but instead "understandable, but different conclusions," this challenges the brain to work harder. In a young brain, the challenge of sorting out truth from error and chiseling new pieces and old until they fit into a congruent block is an exciting part of discovering the reign. An adolescent from a Christian home may therefore unpack a bundle from a secular worldview, compare it to his HOK blocks based on Scripture, and, instead of rejecting the new information, may swap it all out. Youth from unbelieving homes will hear the gospel and do the same. Both adolescents may horrify their parents who thought they had carefully built their child's HOK.

The Adult Brain: Efficient and Automated

But that kind of wholesale swap is unlikely in later adulthood. Now the HOK is a mansion, a museum of vast experiences, information and approved wisdom. But the house that was once eagerly amassing, exploring and testing new information is now settled, even cemented. Values signposts, and the experiences which imprinted them, are now solidified.

The mature learner's approach to any new information arriving on the elevator has often turned from eagerness to complacency or negativity. The HOK considers itself basically *finished*. So, its new goal is to treasure and protect its hoard. New congruent information may be welcomed



but the mind may not go to the trouble of storing it. When a new arriving bundle *conflicts* with existing blocks, instead of experiencing the thrill of adventure, the adult brain can experience anxiety, discomfort, even pain! The greater the uncertainty or disruption, the worse the discomfort. Being forced to wrestle between biblical truths and cultural understandings can cause a crisis not unlike an uncomfortable earthquake. How can I alter or discard this deep block, one which gives me my identity? What blocks are attached or supported by that cultural block? On the other hand, how can I reject this compelling Scripture bundle? An adult brain experiences this quaking as a *threat*. In fact, brain researchers found that any challenge to a held belief, even a political opinion, causes the same part of the brain to react as it does from *physical* threat. The brain wants to eliminate the conflict quickly. By adulthood it has several well-honed tools handy to defend the HOK.

One toolset to eliminate threats includes biases, rules and principles. These guide decisions *categorically* without thinking deeply about relative merits. Children start creating these rules immediately. Researchers found babies prefer people who look similar and distrust those who look different. By the time we are adults, we easily make snap judgments (“don’t trust people who have beards”), anticipate outcomes (“if I fall, it will hurt”), and follow routines (“I always undress before bed”) without really evaluating relative merits.

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These tools serve us well in many cases, but fail us in others. They can cause us to sin or act foolishly. “This messenger came from that group I don’t trust, so I won’t believe it.” We need to realize when we are operating using automated patterns and consider when it might be important. Biases also make us vulnerable to deceit. Research has shown, for instance, that when someone trusts us, we automatically reciprocate trust. We can be deceived by an unscrupulous scam artist who asks for our help. Similarly, once we decide to trust and respect someone, our positive bias causes us to stop evaluating their words and actions. This is how Barnabas followed Peter into hypocrisy in Gal. 2:13 before Paul startled them both into evaluating their response to the Judaizers.

A second toolset that adults use to avoid earthquakes is by avoiding detail. So, instead of paying close attention to a sermon, for instance, adults absorb only the gist of the message, or the entertaining illustration. They don’t even dig into their existing storerooms. They might say they “enjoyed the sermon,” nodding at the familiar, and perhaps tweaking a congruent block with an insignificant upgrade. But, when tested, they remember little of what the pastor actually taught from Scripture. In a few days, the “gist memory” has disappeared.

A third way adults deal with conflicting bundles is by placing new information in *the attic*. The *attic* of the HOK is high up, isolated from cultural values in the foundation. All Christian information can be conveniently delivered here, safe from cultural, family or business values that may conflict. New bundles here are interpreted and connected *only to other attic blocks*. This handy space allows one to simultaneously hold opposing blocks that cannot both be true. Because they are at opposite ends of the house, they do not provoke an earthquake.

For instance, a person might receive a sermon on the topic of the dignity of each person with a big smile and a hearty “Amen!” on Sunday. He knows John 3:16 by heart, and when pressed, he would declare that of course God loves little children. But if he has only loaded Scripture into his “attic,” down deep the cultural truth titled “your value proceeds from the honorableness of your family” reigns unopposed. Not *every* child has equal value. Certainly a child who has to bury herself each night, and unbury her dirty part in order to obtain food, can only bring shame to the church’s association with her. “If you touch filth, you become filthy” is what his grandfather said.

Flora can be directed to save orphans, still redeemable, not permanently “dirtified” as these girls surely are.

The problem of sequestered worldviews is not limited to non-Western ones. In Western society today, objective commandments have been replaced with a higher dictum to “look within.” Follow your heart is the only source of truth. Despite the fact that Scripture insists that “The one who trusts in his own heart is a fool” (Prov. 28:26), or “The heart is deceitful above all things,” (Jer. 17:9), Western parents rarely even notice this mantra programmed like gospel into young brains from the mouths of every Disney hero and heroine, Olympic athlete, and pop song. Now when people hear preaching or reading that conflicts with their (fallen) heart-impression of rightness or wrongness, they jettison Scripture, not their own judgment.

So what does this mean for Christians involved in discipleship?

As those who believe that God’s Word holds the only antidote to a faulty HOK, how do we as Christian disciplers help people to make the deep changes and replacements needed? One impact of understanding the HOK function is that learning shifts from primarily a teacher giving information, to the HOK Homeowner doing *something* with bundles. The best data lectured or preached in the most compelling way will not alter anything alone. Only a learner can do the hard interior HOK work. The teacher must ask the Holy Spirit how to create earthquakes, even when blocks are cemented in place.

The teacher’s study or information is therefore only a fraction of lesson preparation. One primary role of a teacher is to design for the learner a minimum of four steps:

1. Identify pertinent existing blocks in their House of Knowledge (often through remembering a story).
2. Comprehend the new information correctly.
3. Evaluate, analyze, apply to something, judge, and/or create using the new information. For instance, learners might contrast the data with common assumptions or other areas of Scripture; then apply to various situations; then create a new role play to illustrate the concept to others.
4. Make a *choice*. Identify the changes this new understanding will make when the learner returns to “normal life.”

While facilitated small groups typically accommodate these potentially earthquake-producing steps, one Indian pastor who attended a workshop reported he was using this four-step design during worship, bracketing his sermons with interactive challenges. He shared with delight that his congregation was learning, not just listening. He has decided to assign even more challenging learning tasks to the elders so that Scripture can change them deeply. I pray for this congregation to do more than just grow bigger.

This four-step teaching/learning process is not unique to me or to iTEE Global, but came originally from the life experience and teaching of Dr. Jane Vella, an adult educator working in Africa. In my own experience teaching cross-culturally as well as graduate studies in the field of adult education, I believe they best apply the House of Knowledge principles to actual lesson preparation. The four steps work equally well for learners who have high or low educational backgrounds and in all sorts of cultures. For our teacher training workshops, we use easily translatable labels as “Look Back”, “Look Here”, “Look Deeper”, and “Look Forward” and help disciplers learn to create learning tasks in each category.

Organizations mentioned:

New Scent Centre: <https://newscentcentreintl.org/> or contact Flora Mwikali kanyole@gmail.com.

iTEE Global: www.iteeg.org

Further reading on learning principles/theories:

Cognitive Load https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_load

Zone of Proximal Development https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zone_of_proximal_development

Teaching Adults (Sometimes called Andragogy): <https://web.archive.org/web/20171215125941/http://communitycolleges.wy.edu/Data/Sites/1/commissionFiles/abe/training/abe-ntt/mod-6-articles/ntt---module-6---fs-11-teal-center-adult-learning-theory-fact-sheet-air-logo-rev12-06-11.pdf>

Vella, Jane. *On Teaching and Learning: Putting the Principles and Practices of Dialogue Education into Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2008 (ISBN: 978-0-7879-8699-5). (Vella biography at: <https://www.globallearningpartners.com/founder/>) 