

Several years ago, I imagined a visual metaphor for what I know. It appeared on my personal image screen (which I fancy is located somewhere behind my eyes and midway between my ears). When I reconstruct this image, I see a bucket. It is a galvanized tin milk bucket just like the buckets I carried from the cow barn to the springhouse during childhood visits to my great-aunt's farm. This bucket sits on a flat stone under an old-fashioned pump spout. When it appears, it already contains several inches of original water. This water is what I came into the world knowing: my genetic material, the stuff passed on to me from all the humans who contributed to my essential humanity. Most people agree that humans inherit basic physical characteristics, like eye color and skin tone; many believe we also receive a variety of predispositions to react in certain ways to physical, mental, and emotional stimuli; and a few even maintain that through genetic inheritance, one generation is able to pass on ideas, opinions, and specific behaviors to the next. In other words, if you accepted all three possibilities, a banker's daughter could inherit her merchant banker parent's brown eyes and freckles, predisposition for gastric ulcers, talent for figures, and an inherent economic conservatism. Great controversy rages about what humans do and do not pass from generation to generation by way of genetic inheritance. The original water in my bucket rises above the controversy: it consists of all the stuff I got from those who went before me, whatever that stuff might be.

From the moment we are born, drops of knowing begin to drip from the pump spout into the bucket, each drop spreading out, or dispersing, throughout the water that is already there. The infant "learns" to suck, to see, to hear, to feel. The toddler crawls, walks, speaks, grasps, and explores. The child moves out into the world away from the family, storing up billions of new drops each year. Formal education, as well as experiences with art, literature, and music, add billions more. The drops keep coming for as long as a person lives.

Why the water-in-the-bucket image? Why not sand-in-a-bucket? If a bit of knowing was a grain of sand, it would always remain discrete, a unique grain of sand among many grains of sand. In my experience, bits of knowing are not discrete. The things we come to know do not merely add to what we already know; instead, they disperse throughout the entire bucket and constantly alter the composition of the whole.

The fact that new knowledge has the power to influence the ideas and opinions we already hold is one reason some people believe that knowledge is dangerous. A new experience of any sort can—and does—alter what I already