Belief is Not Limited to What we Know

"Can you figure God out by searching?"--Job 11:7

It was only the wind blown in from the open window and banging the door shut that made such a great noise, shaking the room so much.

The room was the library of a naturalist. It was a pity that some folders of specimens had been left near the edge of the big table because when the door banged shut, the folders fell off, and many samples of plants and seaweeds and such were scattered on the floor.

"Do we meet again?" said a sea anemone to a red coral into whose company he had been tossed in the fall. "Remember me? It's great to see you again! What strange things have happened to us since the waves flung us on the sand together!"

"Is that you?" replied the red coral. "Yes, and this is a strange place we've ended up in! Well, well, it's nice to see you again! How are you this morning, after all the rinsing and drying and squeezing and gluing we've undergone?"

"Physically I feel okay," said the sea anemone, "but I'm very, very sad. There's a lot of difference between you and me. You have no reason to be sad. You're basically unchanged now that you're here, except that you can't grow any more. But me? I'm nothing but a skeleton of what I used to be. All the happy little sea creatures who used to live in and among me are all dead and dried up now. They died by the hundreds soon after I left the sea. Even if they had survived being lifted out of the sea, the bitter fresh water we were soaked in by that horrible being who picked us up would have killed them immediately. What are you smiling at?"

"I'm smiling at you," said the red coral. "Imagine calling our new master a horrible being! And I'm smiling at the way you speak so fondly of those little creatures who inhabited you."

"Why shouldn't I speak fondly of what I know so well?" asked the sea anemone.

"It's fine to speak fondly of what you know," said the red coral. "But I wonder if we know as much as we think we know? People can get stubborn about things they think they know, and then, wouldn't you know it, it turns out that what they were so sure about was a mistake."

"What makes you say that?" asked the sea anemone.

"I learned about it from a very interesting creature I met here--a bookworm. He walks through all the books in the library whenever he wants and picks up quite a bit of information, and knows a great deal. And he says he's nothing compared to the creature who picked us up--that 'horrible creature,' as you call him. My friend the bookworm says that the creature is a man, and he says that man is the most wonderful creature in the world. There's nothing like him anywhere. The particular man who picked us up is a naturalist. A naturalist is someone who knows all about living creatures, and plants, and rocks, and all kinds of other things. Wouldn't you agree that it's a great honor to belong to such a creature, and to be friends with his bookworm?"

"Of course I would," said the sea anemone, "and I do."

"I thought you would," said the red coral. "And yet, would you believe, this naturalist and his bookworm are just a couple of examples of what I meant. They think they know everything, and get extremely stubborn about the most absurd mistakes."

"My friend," said the sea anemone, "are you any kind of intellect to be able to judge in matters like this?"

"You think not?" responded the red coral. "Let me give you just one example. Do you know what the bookworm and I have been arguing about all morning? Whether I'm a plant or an animal! He swears that I'm an animal full of little living creatures like the ones you used to live with, and he says there's a long article about it on the other side of the page I'm glued to!"

"What nonsense!" began the sea anemone indignantly, yet amused. But he was interrupted by the red coral.

"I'm embarrassed to tell you what he said about you. He told me that for generations and generatons, you and all your family and relatives were considered plants! It was only recently that naturalists figured out that you're an animal. Aren't I correct then when I say that people get very stubborn about what they think they know, and then it turns out to be all wrong? As for myself, I confess that I'm confused with all these blunders."

"That's disappointing," murmured the sea anemone. "I thought we'd fallen into the hands of some brilliant and fascinating creatures. I'm sorry they're so dim-witted. It was so pleasant to think that some wonderful and wise beings existed who spend all their time finding out about plants and animals and things, and keep us categorized in these beautiful books so carefully. I loved that thought, and now I find that these wonderfully wise creatures are wonderfully ignorant instead."

"Yes, they're very ignorant," laughed the red coral. "But our learned bookworm would tell you otherwise! But he gets muddled and confused when he talks about them, poor fool."

"It must be easy to make fun of those who are superior to you," said a strange voice, and the bookworm, who had just eaten his way through the back of a book (Lord Bacon's 'Advancement of Learning') suddenly appeared to them. He had been listening to their conversation. "I'll regret ever telling you a thing if you misuse the little bit of knowledge you've acquired so far."

"I beg your pardon, my friend," cried the red coral. "I didn't mean any harm. You see, it's a new experience for us to learn anything. If I laughed, you must excuse me. I didn't mean any harm, only I happen to know for a genuine fact that I was never truly alive with little creatures in the same way my friend here the sea anemone was. And he happens to know from first-hand experience that he was never a plant. That's why it made us smile to think of a wonderful creature like your man making such silly mistakes."

The bookworm smiled at first, but then he shook his head seriously and said, "Whatever mistakes man makes, he can always find out and correct later. I mean, he can discover and correct mistakes he makes about creatures who are inferior to him that he learns about through first-hand observation. He might not observe carefully enough on some days and so he makes erroneous conclusions, but he can fix

those when he looks more carefully next time. I never take back something I've said when I know without a doubt that it's true. So I'll tell you again--you can laugh if you like, but in spite of his mistakes, man is the most wonderful and most clever of all the creatures on the earth, hands down!"

"I'll bet you aren't clever enough to prove that!" cried both the sea anemone and the red coral at the same time.

"Imagine! The very idea of thinking that I and all my living inhabitants are a plant!" scoffed the sea anemone.

"And thinking that I, with my plant interior and lime-covered exterior, am an animal!" laughed the red coral.

"Go ahead and laugh," said the bookworm. "But then listen. If you had worked your way through as many books as I have, you would laugh less, and know more."

Oh, don't be so offended, Bookworm!" said the sea anemone.

"I'm not offended," said the bookworm. "I know exactly why you're making the mistake you're making, so it's easy to excuse you. I'm just trying to figure out a way to prove what I said about the superiority of man in a way you'll understand."

"Aha!" said the red coral. "Then you admit that it's not so easy to prove! You just said you were having a hard time figuring out how to prove it."

"Yes, I am," admitted the bookworm. "But the difficulty isn't what you think. I don't like to say it, but what prevents you from understanding how superior man is, is your own enormous inferiority to him. No matter how many mistakes he might make about you, he can correct them with some more diligent observation. But no amount of observation can make you understand what man is like. You are within the grasp of his ability to understand you, but he is beyond the reach of your own understanding."

"For all your learning, you're not very polite," said the red coral.

"I promise you I don't mean to be rude," said the bookworm. "You're both very beautiful creatures, and useful, too. But don't flatter yourselves that you know everything, or that you're even capable of knowing everything. And most of all, don't challenge the superiority and abilities of another being simply because you don't understand them."

"Are you saying, then," asked the red coral, "that I should believe whatever fantastic stories anyone chooses to tell me about the superior abilities of other creatures? And when I ask what those superior abilities are, I'm going to be told that I can't understand them, but I should believe them anyway?"

"That's not what I'm saying," said the bookworm. "Don't believe them unless their abilities are proved by equally superior results. But if the results are there, then you should believe them, whether you understand them or not."

"But how am I supposed to believe something I don't understand?" asked the red coral.

"Then don't believe it," said the bookworm. "Remain an ignorant fool your entire life. The truth is, you can't really understand anything except what falls within the narrow limits of your own intellect. But if

you want to make that the boundary of what you believe to be true, good luck. At least you won't be burdened with lots of knowledge."

"Well!" exclaimed the red coral. "It's easy for you to be scornful to your inferiors, Mister Bookworm! Your time would be better spent trying to explain to me man's wonderful abilities, so you can thus remove the difficulties that prevent me from believing."

"Even if I tried my hardest, I couldn't do that," said the bookworm. "You can't even understand my own superiority, much less man's."

"Oh, now you're getting conceited!" cried the red coral.

"I promise you, I'm not," said the bookworm. "But you can decide for yourself. There are many things I am able to do that you aren't capable of. For one thing, I can see."

"See?" said the red coral. "What's that?"

"I knew it," said the bookworm. "I knew I'd confuse you right from the beginning. Seeing is something I do with this interesting apparatus in my head called eyes. But you don't have eyes. Therefore you can't see. How can I make you understand what seeing is?"

"You can try describing it to us," answered the red coral.

"How can I do that?" asked the bookworm. "I can simply tell you that I can see. I can say, 'I'm seeing now, as I walk over you. I can see the little bits of you that come in front of my eyes;' I can tell you what I'm seeing, but how can I make you understand what seeing is? You have no eyes, so you can't see. Therefore, you can never understand what seeing is like."

"Then why do we need to believe that such a thing as seeing exists?" asked the sea anemone.

"I don't care whether you believe it or not!" said the bookworm. "Don't believe it if you don't want to! There's no harm in being ignorant and narrow-minded. I'd rather you drop the whole matter altogether. You're both annoying and easily offended. And it's all because of your pride and vanity. You want to think you're higher up in creation than you are, and no good ever comes from that kind of thinking. If you'd be content to learn amazing things in the only way available to you, I'd enjoy telling you more."

"The only way available to us?" said the sea anemone. "And what way is that?"

"From the results," said the bookworm. "By the effects that result from man's abilities. Like I said before, even though you can't understand man's wonderful abilities themselves, you might have the humility to believe that they exist because of their wonderful results."

"Tell us about some results, then," said the red coral. "What are some results from this thing you call seeing?"

"In man," interrupted the bookworm, "the results of his seeing are that he gets to learn everything about you. And not just you, but all the different creatures and plants and rocks he looks at. He gets to know your shape, how you grow, your color, all about the cellular structure of the little creatures that live in you. He learns how many feelers those tiny creatures have, what they eat, how they catch their food, how their eggs come out of their egg cells, where you live, where he can find you, what other

anemonies are related to you and which ones have the most in common with you. In other words, he can find out the most intricate details. Then when he adds you to his collection, he can categorize you with those who are most like you, not some strange creature. He can describe you, and draw pictures of you, and give you a name so that no matter where you're found, everyone will know that you're the same creature all over the world. And now I'm all out of breath from telling you about all these amazing results from man's ability to see."

"But he mistook me for a vegetable," muttered the sea anemone.

"Yes, I know," said the bookworm. "Like I said, he hadn't observed you closely enough. He hadn't invented the odd instrument that lets his great big eye see tiny little creatures like the ones that lived in you. But he invented that instrument, and it let him look more carefully, and that's when he saw more about you."

"But he still thinks I'm an animal," protested the red coral.

"I know," said the bookworm. "But he won't think so for long. If you're a plant, I'm sure he'll figure it out when he examines you a little more closely."

"Those are some strange things you expect us to believe," observed the sea anemone.

"Yes, and there are plenty more things even more strange that I could tell you," laughed the bookworm. "Whatever you can't find out for yourself, you'll have to take on faith from those who are superior to you. There's no other way. Observing things and hearing revelations are the only ways there are to get knowledge."

Just then, the door opened and two gentlemen walked into the room.

"Oh no! My brand new specimens are on the floor!" said the Naturalist. and he bent over to pick them up. "Never mind; here's the one I wanted to show you. It will do quite nicely for my purpose. I only need a tiny branch of it, though."

The Naturalist cut off a bit of the red coral and laid it in a dish. He poured some liquid from a bottle over it, and it bubbled and began to wear away some of the lime coating from the red coral. The gentlemen sat watching the result.

"Do you see that?" whispered the bookworm to the sea anemone. "Those two men are looking closely at your coral friend. They're doing what they call 'experiments' so they can figure out what he is. If they don't figure out that he's a plant, then I'll admit I'm wrong about man's abilities, and concede in despair."

But the men did succeed!

The gentlemen kept watching until the lime coating was completely dissolved and there was nothing left in the dish but a delicate reddish branch with little round things on it. They looked like tiny apples.

"That is obviously the fruit," remarked the Naturalist. "Now let's see what it looks like under the microscope."

And they did.

After about an hour, the bookworm and his two friends became sleepy. They had waited to hear what the Naturalist would say until they were tired. Therefore, they were startled when he suddenly exclaimed, "It's impossible to doubt! If I ever doubted, I am certain now--the Coralinnas must be removed from their classification of animals, and moved back to the plant category."

The naturalist laughed as he loosened the glue from the specimen. He reglued the specimen onto a fresh sheet of paper, and filed it with the corals. Then the two gentlemen left the room again.

"So he really did discover the truth about the red coral!" cried the sea anemone. "He was even right about the fruit! Oh, bookworm, I wish I could know what seeing is!"

"Oh, sea anemone, don't waste your time struggling after things that can't be had. You know what it means to feel; I can tell you that seeing is sort of like feeling, but different. Will that do?"

"That doesn't make sense. It sounds like nonsense."

"It is nonsense. There is no other answer but nonsense if you want to truly understand abilities that are beyond you. Try explaining to that rock you're growing on what it means to feel."

"How could I do that?" asked the sea anemone. "It has no sensation."

"Right. No more than you have sight," said the bookworm.

"That is very true," said the sea anemone. "I'm satisfied, bookworm. Humbled, I confess, but also satisfied. And now I'll just be happy for where we are now, and glory in our new master, and admire his amazing abilities, even if I can't understand them."

"I'm proud of you, student," smiled the bookworm kindly.

"I'm a student, too," chimed in the red coral. "But tell me now, does man have any other strange abilities?"

"Several," said the bookworm. "But to really understand them, you have to have them. A lower ability can't fully comprehend a higher ability. But limiting what you believe to only the boundaries of your own small abilities is like tying yourself to the foot of a tree and denying the existence of its upper branches."

"I guess there are no other abilities beyond the ones that man has," mused the sea anemone.

"I never said that," replied the bookworm. "On the contrary--"

But no one knows what he would have said, because the door opened again. The Naturalist came in alone and spent the evening putting the specimens in their proper volumes on his shelves. It was a long, long time before the bookworm saw his friends again, because the volumes they were kept in were made of good Russian leather, whose smell he disliked, so he was never able to make his way to them for a friendly chat after that.

Red coral: Seaweed/Corallina
zoophyte-sea anemone (animal that looks plantlike) (eh NEH moh nee)