



## Know Thyself

By Kirstin Austin, Chief Learning Officer, U.S. Government Accountability Office

“Know thyself” is one of the dictums I heard over and over again as a young student. I will admit I really did not know what it meant -- how else could one be in the world, except as yourself?

Earliest references to this saying assert that the quote could be found over the entrance to Temple of Delphi in ancient Greece. Socrates also included it in his teachings. After my earlier introduction, I encountered this saying again when I took up reading mystical writings from the medieval period (I like obscure readings), and it even came up in business articles. As I grew older, I thought there must be more to this saying than I was considering. But what could it mean to a modern person, living in the high-tech world of 21st century?

I have taken on many roles over my career, both in private and public sector, as a consultant and as an in-house staff person. I’ve found that human nature remains the same, even when the setting changes. I would, more frequently than I would like to acknowledge, find myself making the same types of mistakes again and again. I grew to understand that some of those reactions could be arising from my lack of self-reflection and self-knowledge. This could be as simple as knowing what my “hot button” issues are, so that I did not get triggered and over-react, to as complex as considering my core values. A challenge to core values can lead to deep feeling of dislocation and unease. If I did not know what was causing the feeling, I did not know how to address the issues at hand to bring myself into alignment with my values.

I began a quest to “know myself”, in particular in the work setting.

**What were my triggers?**

**What mission did I feel most aligned with?**

**What were my inner values that would lead me to feel fulfilled, or alternately, dismayed?**



I find that a round-about exploration often leads to interesting insights. I remember a book I had as a young child on courageous women. It was written in short vignettes for the elementary-aged reader, with nice illustrations. It included such women as Harriet Tubman, Jane Addams, and Clara Barton.



Thinking back to these woman I found so admirable in childhood, I decided to look into Clara Barton in more detail. I learned about her childhood, and how she took care of her brother after an injury. I learned that she refused to be paid less than a man in her first teaching position, and about her service as a nurse in the civil war. That is a bit of an understatement, as she led fundraisers to get supplies for the nurses who cared for Union soldiers, led first responders on to the battle field to care for the wounded, and ordered about high ranking military if they did not respond to care needs as she thought best.

She then went on to found the American Red Cross. She did all this while dealing with her own issues - she most likely had chronic depression and anxiety, although it was not described that way at the time.

I reflected on what I found so completing about Clara Barton's life. I was moved by her focus on what she believed to be her calling, on her need to provide public service, and on making the most of her leadership and organizational skills in spite of daunting obstacles. This gave me some insight into my core values - I had always admired my family's history of public service, but yet, at the time, I was not in public service. I made the switch to public service almost 15 years ago, and I can say that for me, it is a far more compelling and fulfilling a mission than any I had before. Before, I often felt that my work lacked some depth that I was longing for, which left me feeling rudderless. I had lots of rewarding professional experiences, but they did not seem to be adding up to the whole I was looking for.

I had a string of mismatched beads that did not create a cohesive necklace. When I switched to public service I felt what can only be described as relief, when I saw that my efforts could align with an inner need I had to provide public service. It was what I needed to really become my best.

Because I felt my work was now aligned with my calling to provide public service, I was able to make strides in other areas that needed my attention, including professional development, and yes, working on those trigger points, so that I could master them, instead of them mastering me.

This is just one example of the rewards that may follow when your take the time and energy to "know thyself". You, as well, can benefit from such reflection, and strive to align your work with your values.



**About the Author:**

Kirstin Austin is a dedicated professional with a unique mix of public, non-profit, and private sector experience. She established and ran her own company for 15 years, led a non-profit out of a financially precarious position to stability and growth, and has moved forward a diverse range of initiatives during her tenure as a civil servant. She is results focused, while working across boundaries to build support and align to mission. Kirstin brings her learning, development and organization improvement expertise developed over 25+ years in consulting and civil service.