Let’s say you wanted to understand a social problem in depth. Let’s say you wanted to move from a dry, statistical understanding of a problem to a rich, humane one. How would you do it? What steps would you take on your climb toward understanding?

Well, obviously, first you’d start with the data. Let’s say, for example, you were studying teenage pregnancy. You’d want to understand the basic facts and trends. You’d discover from a recent Brookings Institution report that annual teenage childbearing rates have declined by an astonishing 52 percent since 1991.

Next you’d want to get some grasp of the general causes for this phenomenon. At this stage, you would consult the academic research.

This research casts doubt on some possible explanations for the amazing decline. Teenage pregnancy rates are not
falling because abortion is on the rise. As far as we can tell, abortion rates are falling, too. Better sexual education must have had some role, but that doesn’t explain the trend either. Teen pregnancy is declining just as much in states like Texas without comprehensive sex ed as it is in states like New Jersey with it.

On the other hand, improved contraception is working. Pregnancy rates fall as people move away from condoms toward IUDs. Sexual attitudes are changing, too. Teenagers are having their first sexual experiences later than they used to and they are less sexually active than previous generations.

This academic research offers a look at general tendencies within groups. The research helps you to make informed generalizations about how categories of people are behaving. If you use it correctly, you can even make snappy generalizations about classes of people that are fun and useful up to a point.

But this work is insufficient for anyone seeking deep understanding. Unlike minnows, human beings don’t exist just as members of groups. We all know people whose lives are breathtakingly unpredictable: a Mormon leader who came out of the closet and became a gay dad; an investment banker who became a nun; a child with a wandering
anthropologist mom who became president.

We all slip into the general patterns of psychology and sociology sometimes, but we aren’t captured by them. People live and get pregnant one by one, and each life and each pregnancy has its own unlikely story. To move the next rung up the ladder of understanding you have to dive into the tangle of individual lives. You have to enter the realm of fiction, biography and journalism. My academic colleagues sometimes disparage journalism, but, when done right, it offers a higher form of knowing than social science research.

By conducting sensitive interviews and by telling a specific story, the best journalism respects the infinite dignity of the individual, and the unique blend of thoughts and feelings that go into that real, breathing life.

A pregnancy, for example, isn’t just a piece of data in a set. It came about after a unique blend of longings and experiences. Maybe a young woman just wanted to feel like an adult; maybe she had some desire for arduous love, maybe she was just absent-minded, or loved danger, or couldn’t resist her boyfriend, or saw no possible upside for her future anyway. In each case the ingredients will be different. Only careful case-by-case storytelling can
uncover and respect the delirious iconoclasm of how life is actually lived.

But even this isn’t the highest rung on the ladder of understanding. Statisticians, academics and journalists all adopt a dispassionate pose. Academics rely on formal methodology and jargon. Journalists observe from behind the wall of their notebooks.

The highest rung on the stairway to understanding is intimacy. Our master-teacher here is Augustine. As he aged, Augustine came to reject those who thought they could understand others from some detached objective stance.

He came to believe that it take selfless love to truly know another person. Love is a form of knowing and being known. Affection motivates you to want to see everything about another. Empathy opens you up to absorb the good and the bad. Love impels you not just to observe, but to seek union — to think as another thinks and feel as another feels.

There is a tendency now, especially for those of us in the more affluent classes, to want to use education to make life more predictable, to seek control as the essential good, to emphasize data that masks the remorseless unpredictability of individual lives. But people engaged in direct contact with problems like teenage
pregnancy are cured of those linear illusions. Those of us who work with data and for newspapers probably should be continually reminding ourselves to bow down before the knowledge of participation, to defer to the highest form of understanding, which is held by those who walk alongside others every day, who know the first names, who know the smells and fears.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on May 16, 2014, on page A27 of the New York edition with the headline: Stairway to Wisdom.