

Living with Uncertainty

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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I want to begin by asking the following question: what does Confucius, a Unitarian theologian, mental health workers in Finland, and two scientists in Canada have in common? Sounds like a joke; it's not, so let's try this: A man stumbles into a deep well and plummets a hundred feet before grasping a spindly root, stopping his fall. His grip grows weaker and weaker, and in his desperation he cries out, "Is there anybody up there?" He looks up, and all he can see is a cloudy circle of sky. Suddenly, the clouds part and a beam of bright light shines down on him. A deep voice thunders, "I, the Lord, am here. Let go of the root, and I shall save you." The man thinks for a moment, and then yells, "Is there anybody else up there?" (Hanging by the root has a tendency to tip the scales toward reason.) But I digress. Back to my question: What does the philosopher, theologian, mental health workers and theoretical physicists—people separated by continents, centuries and professional disciplines—have in common?

In the words of physicist Neal Turok, while delivering last year's Massey Lecture, the answer goes something like this: "for the purpose of advancing our knowledge, it is extremely important to *doubt constantly* and to *live with uncertainty*." (my emphasis, See Turok, *The Universe Within: From Quantum to Cosmos*, 2012, p. 249)

It was just weeks after Diana and I had married and moved into our first apartment in Providence, Rhode Island where I was a religious studies student at Brown University. We were studying a scripture passages together and I gave my interpretation about what I thought a certain passage meant. Diana quietly replied in disagreement, and offered an alternative explanation. I'm not proud of what happened next, because what's seared in my brain is how defensive I

became that she would disagree with me. And here thirty-five years ago, I already liked to think I was this open-minded, liberal kind of guy!

“One of the guilty pleasures of reading [the ancient Greek philosopher] Plato,” writes Mark Lilla, “comes from recognizing human types who claim to want truth, when all they are really after is comfort or recognition, or domination or revenge or support for their moral and political prejudices. And the discomfort experienced in reading them is that you occasionally run across yourself.” (Lilla) *Touche*.

What may lurk behind claims to wanting truth is a deep seated need to possess certainty and authority, to be recognized by others and ourselves as possessing both.

I understand that need; we seek the comfort, recognition, and support from others for the truths, certainties and whatever measure of authority we possess. We seek it to get our bearings in this world, so can get on with the work of making a living and making a life—a life in company with friends, partners, and family without constant, nagging second guessing, without the undermining of professional competencies, social roles and deep seated values about the world and our place in it. Truths too lightly held, blown away by the slightest gust—its chaos.

When camping at night, we stake tents down for a reason. We also need the ground beneath us, stakes to drive in, and tools and enough skill to do the work. That’s clear enough; but what if our partner, or a child, notes that we’ve pitched the tent in a depression or not driven in all the pegs or we’ve not dug a trench around the tent and they point out that the wind’s picking up and clouds are massing in the skies above. How do we respond? “It’s getting too dark; I know what I’m doingor do we say, well, we *could* move the tent and start again.”

The human need for recognition and support for our truths, our certainty and authority may but slightly mask blinkered knowledge, moral prejudice, a will to domination, or just plain impatience and sloppiness. That way lies dogmatism, paternalism and abuse of authority, and untold suffering—we see it time and again.

How do you overcome the most basic human drive of self-preservation and launch millions of men, with the support of their families and communities, into the horrors and carnage of war? In 1914, religious leaders did their part by preaching with utmost certainty that the First World War was a holy crusade with the fate of civilization at stake. With few exceptions, Unitarian ministers in the English speaking world joined the martial chorus. Here's the Unitarian minister, Albert Dieffenbach, who was also the editor of the *Christian Register*—at that time the leading Unitarian journal. Speaking of the Great War, Dieffenbach wrote: “Christ would take up bayonet and grenade and bomb and rifle and do the work of deadliness against the most deadly enemy of his Father’s Kingdom in a thousand years.” (quoted in Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, Vol. 2, 368) Certainty that that War was a holy crusade contributed to demolishing the relevance of organized religion, including Unitarianism, in Great Britain and seriously undermined it in Canada for decades when the full horror of the War started to come home and ministers had little, save clichés and mute solace, to offer grief stricken families.

Another example. According to numerous polls, when asked: what is the underlying cause of mental disorders that afflict up to a quarter of our population—80 % of respondents said that they were caused by chemical imbalances in the brain. This view is widespread, it's spoken of and held with certainty by many professionals, journalists and lay folk alike, and is the basis for conventional bio-medical psychiatric treatment. However, writes Dr. David Burns professor

emeritus of psychiatry at Stanford University: “I [have] reviewed the entire world literature...but couldn’t find one shred of compelling evidence that...any chemical imbalance in the brain cause [s] depression, anxiety, or any other psychiatric disorder. To this day, I am still not aware of any studies that have ever validated the chemical imbalance theory.” (* see page 9)

(<http://www.anxietycentre.com/downloads/Chemical-Imbalance-Theory-is-False.pdf>)

What gives? Why the dissonance here between myth, certitude and evidence? (+ see page 9)

To be sure, the suffering is real and so is the desperate need to know its cause. There are those who experience relief from medications and from being told that the roots of their distress are biologically based. My own experience these past nine years with the mental health world—its myths and practice—has been a nightmare. And not since I was a Mormon have I experienced such dogmatic certitude, emotional manipulation and authoritarian abuse based on so little evidence, wishful thinking, and a distorted understanding of the core meaning of the richness of human diversity. I know something about the high cost of certainty demanded by religion; I have learned something of its cost as well in the beyond-the-looking-glass world of bio-medical psychiatric treatment.

It’s not easy living with the constancy of uncertainty and doubt—you know that and so do I, and yet the physicist Neil Turok makes a strong claim that for the sake of knowledge, we must “*doubt constantly and live with uncertainty.*” In Ursula LeGuin’s classic novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* one of her characters put it like this:

“The unknown, the unforeshadowed, the unproven, that is what life is based on. Ignorance is the ground of thought...Tell me, what is known? What is sure, predictable, inevitable...There’s really one question that can be answered...and we already know the answer...The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.

I have shared examples with you—personal, historical and contemporary—of the high costs incurred in our pursuit of certainty for the sake of establishing our truths, our expertise, our prejudices. Now, I return to the beginning and the question with which I began: what does an ancient Chinese philosopher, a 20th century Unitarian theologian, contemporary mental health workers in western Finland, and two Canadian based theoretical physicists have in common?—*a robust commitment to living with doubt and uncertainty as a fundamental human value and practice.*

Confucius lived from 551-479 BC; his birthday was celebrated yesterday. Until recently, I had this view that his philosophy was quite dogmatic and that the intent of his teachings about things like filial duty and respect aimed to insure deference to authority and inequality. Those views of mine were recently upended by reading a splendid biography of Confucius by Annping Chin. (see Annping Chin, *The Authentic Confucius: A Life of Thought and Politics*, 2007)

I learned that a main concept in his thought and practice is the virtue of *li*—or *propriety*, which emphasizes avoiding fixed laws by cultivating an attitude of openness to situations and people at hand. Confucius praised adroitness and flexibility in others, and stated: “I have no preconceptions about what one can and cannot do.” (Chin, 54, 57, 117) He liked to ask question about everything. (137) It is said, that when he performed sacrifices at the Temple of the Duke of Zhou, though he had a thorough knowledge of the codes and procedures, still, he approached the rites as if he was about to perform them for the first time, and he told others, “Asking questions is in itself the correct [ritual].” (166) He refused to speculate and pronounce on things he did not understand like if there was a meaning behind natural phenomena; and he didn’t talk about the gods, death or life after death. (180) “Do I possess knowledge?” he once asked. “No, I do not. A [villager] put a question to me and my mind was a complete blank.” (189) He regarded every question put before him, no matter by whom, as new. According to the *Analects*, Confucius

stayed away from four things: he refused to be inflexible or to put himself above anyone; he refused to entertain overarching theories or to insist on certainty. (see Confucius, *The First Ten Books*, trans. D.C. Lau, Book IX, 4) Which reminds me of something else he said: “It is fitting that we should hold the young in awe. For how do we know that the generations to come will not be equal to the present?” (Confucius, IX. 23)

Cultivating an attitude of openness to situations and people at hand, refusing to insist on certainty—central features to the Confucian principles—were hallmarks of the religious philosophy of the 20th century Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman. The core of his ideas focused on what he called “creative interchange.” Wieman closely studied interpersonal relations and communication. He was acutely aware of the obstacles to effective communication, but knew, as well, how it could work in revelatory, transformative ways.

It begins with a profoundly non-hierarchical attitude and an appreciative openness to the mysterious depths and experience of one another. It proceeds by expressing one’s self to others, others intentionally committed to understanding you and being willing to be transformed by what they learn, and for you to be transformed in turn. That kind of interchange can create something new in the world, what Wieman called: “the emergence in the mind of what was not there before.” That kind of creative emergence reveals, Wieman believed, all we could know or discover about the “depth and fullness” of that “in which we find our ultimate stay and trust.” In other words, it’s a kind of sacred experience—creating something that was not there before. But it requires that we come to interpersonal encounters without preconceptions about persons and outcomes; and it proceeds from there with a faithful commitment to live with uncertainty—trusting patiently, that in time the unknown and unsearched creative, sustaining depths residing

in every human being and our capacity for transformation will be revealed. (see Wieman, *Man's Ultimate Commitment*, 1958, pp. 9-35)

A striking, contemporary example of the effective power of creative interchange can be seen in the Open Dialogue therapeutic approach by mental health teams in Western Finland for people experiencing first episode psychotic crises—an approach that has produced the best recovery outcomes in the so-called developed, or industrial world for people experiencing emotional and mental crises. (see Epperson, “Dialogue as a Way of Life,” January 6, 2013) To recap briefly, first, the mental health team responds to a crisis with home visits within twenty-four hours; they gather the social network of the person who is the center of concern, and collectively and openly with that person and his or her support network present, they work through the crisis until it’s over, even if it means visiting every day in the person’s home for weeks.

Now here’s where “Open Dialogue” sounds like something taken straight from Confucius and Wieman—two or three people, trained for three years in how to tolerate uncertainty—yes, it can be that difficult!—arrives at the person’s home with no preconceptions, no diagnosis, no prescriptions, no treatment plan devised without the person and her network participating and present. Principles and practice are grounded in dialogue, transparency and tolerance for uncertainty. Dialogue, writes Jaakko Seikkula, “creates a forum where families and patients have the opportunity to increase their sense of agency in their own lives...Instead of having some specific interviewing procedure, the team’s aim is constructing dialogue to follow the themes and ways of speaking that the family members are used to”; through this, a “new understanding is built up in the space between the participants in the dialogue.” Living with uncertainty, Seikkula writes, entails “an active attitude among the therapists to live together with the [patient’s] network aiming at a joint process, instead of the treatment” being imposed from the outside. (see

Jaakko Seikkula, et al, "Open Dialogue Approach..." *Ethical and Human Sciences and Services*, 2003, 5(3), 163-182; and Seikkula, "Cecoming Dialogical: Psychotherapy or a Way of Life?", *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 32, 3, 2011, pp 179-193)

Which, in the end, brings us back to the Perimeter Institute in Ontario, and two theoretical physicists: Neil Turok and Lee Smolin. Turok has already provided the provocative statement that kicked this sermon into gear. In his Massey Lecture, he stated that "for the purpose of advancing our knowledge, it is extremely important to *doubt constantly* and to *live with uncertainty*. This attitude of mind, he continues, this attitude of uncertainty is vital to the scientist." And for Turok, that means a willingness by scientists to enter into, what is for them, a realm of profound uncertainty: and that is to engage in the very questions many people outside science want scientists to explore and talk about, like: What do scientific discoveries mean? *Why* does the universe exist and *why* are we here? And then he continues: "My own view is that science should ultimately be about serving society's needs....There's an inspirational aspect of science and of understanding our place in the universe which enriches society and art and music and literature and everything else." (Turok, 248-9)

Which brings me finally to Lee Smolin (we've just rounded third base and are almost home). Smolin, like Turok is a theoretical physicist and the Director of the Perimeter Institute. He's renowned for his work on something called quantum loop gravity (and has recently written a provocative book on the reality of time; which is actually a revolutionary proposition in contemporary physics). It's what he says about how science works that's important here; it responds to Turok's belief that science can be inspirational and that for the sake of advancing knowledge, it's most important lesson is the value of doubt and uncertainty. Smolin asserts that science works when those who engage in it are bound by a set of ethics. And it goes like this: 1) be honest, adhere to rational argument, and be willing to admit failure; 2) argue forcefully for what you believe, but leave the last word to those who

follow; 3) learn the tools of the trade to lessen error; 4) respect the give and take seriously of all who agree to be bound by the same ethics—no matter their age or position; and 5) leave all that we have not achieved by consensus to a realm of honest doubt and disagreement. (Smolin, TED Talks, February 2003)

What we see in all of these examples from ancient China to Ursula LeGuin to the physicists at the Perimeter Institute in Waterloo, Ontario is a deeply wise and profoundly ethical commitment to the virtue of doubt and a willingness to embrace living with uncertainty. “I have no preconceptions about what one can and cannot do.” I refuse to “insist on certainty,” said Confucius.

Though uncertainty can feel intolerable—the not knowing what comes next; it is the very ground of thought and the abode of our tragic, exceptional greatness. “The unknown, the unfortold, the unproven, that is what life is based on,” wrote Ursula LeGuin. May we embrace it as best and courageously as we can and thus add our own creative measure to what we affirm as that “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

*Dr David Levine, of the editorial advisory board of the journal *Ethical Human Psychology and Psychiatry* writes: “no biochemical, neurological, or genetic markers have been found for attention deficit disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, compulsive alcohol and drug abuse, overeating, gambling, or any other so-called mental illness, disease, or disorder.” (<http://www.anxietycentre.com/downloads/Chemical-Imbalance-Theory-is-False.pdf>)

+A perfect storm. A nexus of drug company marketing, the debasement of science through suppressed test results, ghost written medical journal articles, and the underwriting of research and education at medical schools by multinational pharmaceutical companies with attendant pressures to produce the expected outcomes, **and** the real existential suffering of untold millions of people.