



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The gift of not knowing

Clay Nelson © 16 June 2019

The first time I remember reflecting on the counter intuitive idea that not knowing is a gift was while visiting my father in the hospital. He had been there for a while suffering from kidney disease. It had been difficult to watch his decline. He had lost his appetite, but I convinced him to put in a feeding tube over his reservations to give the doctors time to work out an effective treatment. On a visit one evening he was more alert and engaged than he had been for some time. We had an amazing conversation about the past, present and future. I left that evening full of hope that we had turned a corner. I returned early in the morning only to learn he had died an hour before my arrival. I was devastated and full of guilt that I had not stayed through the night with him if I had only known. It would take a while but I eventually came to understand not knowing had been a gift. That last conversation would have been very different if I had known. It would have been shaped by death. Instead it was full of life and one of my most treasured memories.

When I look back on my life journey the gift of not knowing has littered the path, but not intentionally. Not knowing is a time of anxiety and stress. I do not relish travelling without an itinerary. It is in my nature to plan my transitions when I come to a fork in the road. I try to consider all the consequences of my decisions, both intentional and unintentional. But I've learned that life doesn't care about my plans.

I guess that's why the Taoist story about an old farmer makes perfect sense to me. The farmer had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbours came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically.

"Maybe, the farmer replied. The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbours exclaimed.

"Maybe," replied the old man. The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbours again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. "Maybe," answered the farmer. The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbours congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "Maybe," said the farmer.

Glancing back on my life, it's clear that the greatest struggles I've endured were not actually from the pain itself, but rather from that awkward, excruciating, silent period of waiting to see what might come next. I longed for answers, which makes it surprising that my life journey would lead me to Unitarian Universalism. Unlike other faiths we are better at questions than handing out answers.

Perhaps some of you had an earlier life in a Christian denomination that required you to be confirmed to be a full member of the church. Part of that process might have been learning a catechism.

Catechisms are teaching tools that convey the central tenets of the faith to new and emerging believers. They provide one answer to complicated common questions and create a digestible doctrinal foundation for the faith. The answers are seen as a source of authority, and if they are not understood or accepted, the faith journey of the questioner is expected to involve getting there. The journey is about the answers; the questions just orient the one who wonders toward the conclusion that's already been reached.

The only thing worse than memorising a catechism was teaching it to 12 to 14-year olds who would rather be at the dentist. To relieve their misery and ours, my co-teacher and I tried a new approach one year. We turned the catechism into a rap song complete with choreography. I wish YouTube existed at the time to record the youth performing it for the congregation and the Bishop of Puerto who would confirm them. All I can remember of it was the opening line, "If you're Episcopalian and you want to be confirmed then the Book of Common Prayer has everything that must be learned." The Bishop was impressed. When it was time for his sermon he began by rapping it in his strong Puerto Rican accent.

That sense of there being one conclusion is part of the reason that catechisms seem to be falling out of favour in modern religion, even if rapped. They're still there, but they collect a lot of dust. Our history is one with many catechisms being written and recorded on both the Unitarian and Universalist sides of our faith, but nothing new has been created in a long time.

We're more about the questions today. We're more about wondering and embracing the idea that different conclusion can be reached by different people. We're ok with those different conclusions, as long as they don't demand that everyone else embrace them, and as long as they lead to lives of service and love. There's a humility in this approach that reflects the sentiment that a fool knows everything, but a wise one knows they don't. Wisdom is knowing that we don't know everything, which is a modern, gentler phrasing of the more absolute sentiment of ancient Greece that says, "I know, that I know nothing," or "The only thing I know is that I don't know anything." That was Plato building off of Socrates; the point being that answers are illusory and limited. It's the questions that last.

That there are things we do not know is perhaps nowhere more obvious than when we consider our current scientific understanding of our place in the universe. For millennia, it seemed obvious that the Earth was at the centre. Then there was the Copernican revolution, replacing the Earth with the Sun. Now we know that our Sun is just one of billions in our galaxy, and that our galaxy is just one of billions in the universe.

Our understanding of time has similarly been completely transformed. Up to the early 20th century, the scientific consensus was that the universe had always existed. Now we know that the universe and time itself had a beginning.

In the last few years, we have learned more counterintuitive things. We have learned that the standard model of particle physics that describes all known particles accounts for only about 5% of the energy and mass of the universe. The rest is composed of "dark matter" (27%) and "dark energy" (68%). In other words, 95% of the universe is in a form we don't understand.

All of this is humbling. As far as we've come, we have no brighter prospects for a "theory of everything" than Isaac Newton, who said, "I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore,...whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."

It's the questions that must be embraced, and not embraced once in a book for all time, but embraced in our hearts and communities again and again, throughout our lives. We focus on the answers but they come and go. The answers that make sense in one season of life can make little sense in the next, and the answers that are intuitive for one person are realised only with great struggle by another. The questions themselves present the path toward growth; toward community; toward a realisation of an insight or choice that can bring peace to who we are and wholeness to the world. And even the answers that bear those gifts may change over time. They likely will, and probably should as our lives move through different seasons.

What life means at 25 is different than what life means at 75. It kind of has to be. We should expect those answers to be different, and the only catechism that can really guide us is the catechism of one another, the living catechism of community and life together; of our various answers sung together in a common song.

In my search to know everything about not knowing... I came across a reflection by Christopher Goodchild in his book *Unclouded by Longing* that I would like to conclude with. It gives us a unique view of the gift of not knowing through the eyes of someone on the autism spectrum:

Letting go of trying to work everything out in your head can lead you directly into the most sublime mystery of all. Your heart. Your true Self. To open yourself to this mystery, you will often have to pass through the discomfort of the rational mind simply 'not knowing'.

What at first might seem like an impending breakdown can easily become a profound breakthrough. This is beautifully conveyed in 'The Real Work' by Wendell Berry:

"It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings."

The emotional distress that often accompanies losing your direction in life cannot be glamorised nor underestimated, when you are unable to come up with a rational solution to your predicament. However, it is true to say that one of the greatest gifts you have received in this life is the gift of desperation directly linked to the rational mind not coming up trumps.

In many ways 'being' in uncertainty and mystery is a necessary rite of passage you must go through in order to enter into the heart of what it means to be most alive. It is a vocational calling for you to invite the unfamiliar. In living your life in this way you surrender into something greater, your perceptions are stretched, as is your imagination — pushing the boundaries of what is unknown and unforeseen.

The breakthrough experience, whereby you move from lost to found, is exhilarating. The attachment to the small self is loosened, and an infinitely larger, more expansive Self is glimpsed. It is here, in these glimpses that a startling new landscape, or perhaps a radically new way of seeing, is opened up within you. Here the words of Jesus come to mind, 'For

those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

To embrace the gift of not knowing is to embark on one of the greatest adventures, and one that if fully entered into will change your life forever.