



# Purposeful Wanderings

A Monthly Newsletter for Clients and Friends of **The Road Not Taken**

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## A Culture of Not Knowing

“We make our world significant by the courage of our questions  
and by the depth of our answers.” – Carl Sagan

Have you ever *thought* about the thoughts that continually run through your head? Strange question, perhaps, but it exposes the idea that you not only *have* thoughts but you also have a *relationship* with your thoughts (do you believe them? question them? even *notice* them?) It's the same for your “knowing,” too. You have a *relationship* with your knowing (do you accept things on blind faith? hold tightly to your knowing despite evidence to the contrary? inquire into your knowing to learn “*how* you know what you know?” see your knowing as an accomplishment, or maybe as a shortcoming? do you ever even think about questions such as these?)

Forty years of personal struggle in this space made me curious – about how consciousness impacts our lives. Early on, my “knowing” evoked approval from a controlling father and from rigorous teachers alike. Later, it evoked reward and recognition from my high-tech managers. So I grew attached to “knowing.” Yet at the same time, it created emotional distance in my relationships. Add in 40 years of *fear* of *not* knowing, and it all became life-limiting and exhausting for me. Reflecting on this now, I want to understand the larger perspective ... for I know I am not alone.

As a society, it seems we connect “knowing” with a sense of safety and comfort, perhaps as a defense against a growingly complex, uncertain, divisive world. Maybe to feel safer, we hold tightly to our “truth,” *however* we've come to it, then label anything that differs as a threat to our perceived comfort. In so doing, we thereby *deny* our *not*-knowing, by refusing to consider anything new or unknown. The paradox here is that our fear of confronting the unknown keeps us from knowing anything new. The we wonder why our tomorrows look just like our yesterdays. Perhaps Mark Twain said it best: “It ain't what you *don't* know that gets you in trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.”

***What if we weren't afraid of what we don't know?*** What if we could adopt “a culture of not knowing,” an opening to curiosity and understanding – about ourselves, others, life, our planet, and even the cosmos? If we could stop for long enough to inquire within, we might see the *implications* of our defensiveness, and then, very likely, change our ways of seeing in some meaningful way. Perhaps we need, as Wendell Berry suggests, “a language of ignorance,” something not oriented toward blame, shame or guilt, but rather toward openness, acceptance and learning. What if we could learn about all we *think* we know, but don't: the secrets of the universe, the magic of consciousness, the mystery life is, the depths of our humanness, how to live together on this planet both peacefully and sustainably? For years now, I've practiced saying, “I don't know” (largely because I now know I *don't*!), and “help me understand,” both as invitations to expanding my world. In working to overcome my knowing-based prejudices, I've concluded that this shift tells us:

- we need *awareness*, to notice when we come face-to-face with our not knowing ... a signal to stop and listen
- we need *patience*, to recognize old defensiveness triggers ... and not be hooked by them each time
- we need *acceptance*, to realize that others' thinking brought them to a different place than ours brought us... different, but not necessarily wrong ... and that *understanding* someone else is not the same as *agreeing* with them
- we need *courage*, to open our heads and hearts to learning, rather than judgment, whenever we encounter the edges of our knowingness
- we need *trust*, to accept that, even though life is uncertain, we have what it takes to respond with confidence.

With these capacities, we might then engage in *dialogue*, a reverent, respectful, two-way conversation aimed at learning and understanding. Let's face it, if we can't have open, trustful dialogue with those who see the world differently than we do, our “knowing” takes us only deeper into defense, perpetuating the life-limiting thinking and divisiveness we both fail to acknowledge in ourselves yet complain about in our politics, business, and, often, even our family life.

**Book of the month – *The Way of Ignorance***, by Wendell Berry. Although written over 10 years ago, Berry's words echo even more powerfully today than then. A series of short essays, each inquiring deeply and honestly into an aspect of human and societal condition. Insightful, thought provoking, personal, and filled with potential for personal change. And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.