



Purposeful Wanderings

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

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The Wisdom of Not Knowing

*"It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble.
It's what you know for sure the just ain't so." – Mark Twain*

My latest project has been to create a series of booklets, ("mini-coaching programs," if you will) each addressing one of the major challenges facing our lives and times. Among the challenges I see are *Silence*, *Critical Thinking*, *Self-Care*, *Conflict*, *Self-Awareness*, and others. Not sure what form they'll eventually take – online course, video, podcast, another book(?), [just] booklets – but I thought I'd share the essence of one of them this month, on the topic of *Not Knowing*. If you find yourself interested in more, let me know.

As a species, we've always been filled with curiosity and wonder – about ourselves, life and our world. This aspect of our consciousness accounts for our exploration, invention, science and technology. Yet the slow creep of "acculturation" is robbing us of this spirit, leaving us more afraid of the unknown than curious. Intellectually, we see clearly: we don't (and often can't), know all we say we do, all we'd like to, perhaps all we need to know so as to deal with the complexity and uncertainty of life's challenges. Yet our behavior tells a different story. Perhaps unconsciously, we resort to all manner of avoidance strategies to deal with our **not knowing**. We pretend we *do* know. We set goals, to pretend we know the outcome ahead of time. We believe there's only "one right answer" to everything. And of course, we're then led to judgment and divisiveness, to protect our "opinions" (it's all they often are) against "opinions" of others. It's futile; it's exhausting; it's detrimental. We hate that we don't know. While we cling to our habits, clueless there's another way, *questioning* stops; *thinking* stops; and *learning* stops. We then blame life, while the real culprit is an unconsciously adopted thought framework that drives all we do.

What if, growing up, we'd learned to see life "as it truly is," with acceptance and non-judgment, and not as some made up story of "how we think it should be?" Well for starters, without "shoulds" nothing would seem "wrong," so we could rekindle the creative genius that life's inherent uncertainty asks us for. We'd be open to "many right answers," which, of course, is the "way it is" for life's big challenges anyway. We'd learn to listen to our personal experience to guide to our steps, not a made-up measurement or plan. And with this "culture of not knowing," we'd release stress, fear and anxiety – of not knowing, of pretending, of fighting with life (and others). We'd be left with curiosity, wonder, a thirst for exploring the unknown, our innate power of creativity, and self-trust. Not coincidentally, these define "the way it *was*" as a young child; we "unknowingly" allowed life to take it away.

The difference between these two views is only a thought framework – a context – a way of seeing and thinking about ourselves, life, world. We're 100% free to choose our thoughts, so we're just one step away from the unlimited potential the power of human consciousness offers us. And that step is one of conscious awareness, not one of more knowing, more effort, more stress, more busyness. It's a process of self-reflection, of consciously **noticing** how our now-unconscious ways of seeing and thinking have constrained life's possibility.

Given these ideas, what "consciousness" would redirect our lives? My experience suggests that the path forward is made through the cultivation of six innately human **capacities**. All are reclaimed with a simple practice ... of consciously noticing how your thinking impacts your life today (see exercise):

- 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 is not the same as *agreeing* with them.
- we need **courage**, to open ourselves to learning, not judgment, when we meet the edges of what we know.
- we need **resilience**, to allow uncertainty to teach us, not limit us.
- we need **trust**, to accept that, even though life is uncertain, we have what it takes to respond with confidence.

Exercise: Accepting Not Knowing, Part 1: Stop what you're doing a 2 - 3 times each day for a few moments of quiet reflection. Recall situations from your day where you felt a "signal of not-knowing-ness." Habituated as we are, you may not have noticed at the time; herein lies the value of replay. Look back (now) and see what was going on (then). When you didn't know or were unsure of something, did you *notice*? If so, how did you *respond* (did you notice but deny; step back, think and learn something new; or emotionally react)? No judgment; just learning. Discovering the fear-based thoughts underneath your "not knowing" softens their constricting grasp.

Accepting Not Knowing, Part 2: Claim an hour of quiet time some evening. Ponder what you see as "big truths" in life. You might think of truths as "stances you hold," recognizing that your stance on a topic may differ from a stance held by others. For each "truth," name it (Ex: "I believe life is unfair."), then examine quietly and deeply:

- Do I hold this truth as a result of deep personal inquiry? What *thinking* or *life experience* brought me here?
- Does my truth *welcome* and *accept* everyone without judgment/condition? (or does it shield me from them?)
- What assumptions might I be making, perhaps without conscious awareness, that serve to *support* this belief on one hand, yet at the same time may *limit* me from seeing even larger truths?
- How might those who see things differently answer these questions? (How did they arrive at "their" truth?)
- If I could expand the edges of *my* thinking far enough to include *their* thinking, what *dialogue* might we share?

Accepting Not Knowing, Part 3: Big questions open big possibilities. Big questions result from deep personal inquiry and reflection, both so uncommon in our society we rarely experience the *underlying order* in life. A few questions that may take you to new places:

- What if my mind *weren't* already made up about things? What might I discover then? (openness)
- What if I stopped *fighting*, releasing the need to impose my will? What *more* could be possible? (acceptance)
- What if I trusted my inner voice, allowing *it* to guide me instead of my age-old thought patterns? (awareness)
- What if I didn't have to know *how* it would all work out, but just know *that* it would all work out? (trust)
- What if I could open to, discover, then step into the magic experience of life's underlying order? (courage)
- What if I could really *live* with these questions, every day, as a new way of being? (practice)

Life lessons from nature: Think about the *stage* on which we live. Because life is uncertain by design, changing conditions are always bringing new possibilities into view ... not according to a plan or goal, but in response to natural change in the environment. In this way, nature has sustained life on earth for 4 billion years. If we were thinking, seeing and living with the capacities noted above, we'd be poised to step into possibility whenever it passed our way. (If we're too busy trying to control things, we'd never even *notice* it.) That's a big downside of living in a way that's dependent on *life's circumstances* rather than dependent on *our inner power of consciousness*. Nature's lesson tells us we could *do* more if we could simply learn to *see* more. (Plus it's way more fun.)

My book: [Living Authentically ... in a World That Would Rather You Didn't](#). Its *premise* is simple: in the midst of a world that has lost its way, you need never lose your own. Get to know, then honor, your unique truth; the self-trust that emerges will light your way forever. Insights, perspectives, personal reflections and exercises ... so you can make your life your own, not someone else's. All you need to know [here](#) – intro, samples, purchase link – for you or as a gift.

A PODCAST: I was recently invited to be a guest on The Living Alive Show, a podcast hosted by Autumn Shields. I know Autumn, so it was a fun and easy exploration into "living authentically ... in a world that would rather you didn't." If you'd like to listen, here's a [link](#). It's 35 minutes long. You can sign up for her on-going programs there as well. I'm sure she'd welcome you, *and* that you'd gain from the experience.

Book of the month: [Who Do We Choose To Be?](#), by Margaret Wheatley. Her message is powerful ... simple, yet not easy ... stark, yet full of hope. As individuals and as leaders, we need to use our insight and compassion to *bring people together* in dialogue, to evoke the humanity in all of us, to create "islands of sanity in the midst of wildly disruptive seas." A bold piece for troubling times – when it was written, and now! And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985 (Until the shop re-opens, you may place orders online; just send your request to MarketStreetBookshop@protonmail.com.)