



# Purposeful Wanderings

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

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## Opinion vs. Belief vs. Truth

*"I would rather have questions that cannot be answered than answers that cannot be questioned."  
– Carl Sagan*

Curiously, although perhaps not unexpectedly, I've received many "invitations" lately – to join conversations, to read articles, to watch videos – all with strongly political or religious themes, all very assertive on the "*truth*" of their message, and all with forceful requests on the consequent need for me to take action. I've long considered myself a "relentless student of *truth*," so I chose to join/read/watch with a serious eye. My open-minded nature was put to a test, however, as I became aware of their *content*. A sample, strangely consistent across sources: (1) The pandemic is asking us to "secure our personal future" – by repenting; (2) If we're not hardline conservative thinkers, then we're neither "American" nor "Christian" (3) America "sanctions the killing of children," (this turned out to be a new slant against abortion); (4) If we're not afraid of God's punishment, we're not Christian.

I'm pretty open to new ideas, and I allow a fair "latitude in interpretation" when it comes to claims with strong wording ... but any strength these messages *may* have had came from how they screamed "opinion," not from how they supported their claim of "truth." It all got me thinking – *not* about the ideas, but about the distinctions among **opinion**, **belief** and **truth**, and how we use (and *misuse*) them, often on purpose. Here's how I distinguish the three. Yes, they're "my" definitions, yet I believe they'd hold up under a fair amount of scrutiny.

**Opinion:** each of us is free to think anything we choose – on any topic of our choosing. *Opinions neither invite nor need evidence.* Because they require no proof or substantiation, they fall shy of a claim of "truth." If you label your opinion as "true *for you*," fine; but know it may not be "true for others" ... no matter how strongly you hold it. Opinions are "charge neutral;" they carry little energy of their own. Cranking the volume on your opinion doesn't change its status.

**Belief:** each of us is free to hold beliefs on any topic or idea of our choosing. Faith is powerful energy, intended to offer *grounding* for all we can't – or don't yet – know. So belief falls shy of "truth," too. For what we *do* know, however, it's time for acceptance, learning and expanding our sense of self, based on evidence of our knowing. Holding beliefs *despite* evidence is both contradictory and self-limiting. Further, trying to coerce others into "believing your belief" – despite the intensity (or volume) of your request – doesn't change *its* status either.

**Truth:** each of us has the *capacity* to know and discover "truth." There's a [rather rigorous] process for this discovery and knowing: the scientific method. Declaring an idea "truth" requires observation, gathering evidence, experiment, and the ability of the assertion to be proven *false* as well as *true*. (The method is the same, whether the conclusion is found true or false.) Truth stands on its own; it doesn't need to yell. That said, truth is always open to the discovery of even *larger* truth; so in this sense, even truth is malleable, not once-and-for-all rigid.

Science's way of ascertaining truth is based in "skeptical thinking." Skepticism is *not*, as is commonly assumed, questioning with intent to deny, denigrate or disagree. It's questioning with intent to understand and learn. This is how science has unraveled the mysteries of the universe, from formation of galaxies to origins of life on earth to the workings of the atom to structure of delicate snowflakes. Elements of skeptical thinking include:

- engaging in deep inquiry, driven by curiosity and wonder, coupled with an intent to learn and grow
- commitment to rational thought, critical thinking
- not having the mind made up beforehand; willingness to be changed in (and by) the process
- knowing that while each of us interprets the world uniquely, "truth" is not a function of our interpretation

An 'observation' on my part, but I found little evidence in what I heard, read or saw of any such process at work. It seems to me we've gone too long with lack of critical thinking, with flawed logic masquerading as truth, with opinionated blame, with divisiveness worn as a badge of honor, and a seeming inability to grasp even simple concepts with rational thought. **And ... please note:** In no way am I denying *emotion* a place in life ... mine or anyone else's. I'm just denying it as *evidence to support a claim of truth* ... regardless of its volume.

**Exercise #1: *Toward inquiry.*** What's your "inquisitiveness quotient." Ask yourself **how** you've arrived at what you know as truth today. This isn't about *what* you see as truth, but the *process* by which you came to know it. Did your "truth" come from an ever-growing spiral of passionate curiosity? Was it what's left over after failing to look? Give this inquiry some open-minded reflection. See if you can find a relationship between "how you know" and how much possibility your life holds. Clue: they are intimately intertwined, woven together by your tolerance for uncertainty and change. (If you dislike what you discover, you're free to change your mind.)

**Exercise #2: *Changing your viewpoint.*** As a way to shift your perspective so as to create a bigger world, ask some big questions – the kind that don't have "easy answers," but rather invite pondering and reflection, so the answers *seep in*. This kind of quiet, but powerful, inquiry is so uncommon in our society that it's no wonder we don't experience the *underlying order* life offers. Here are a few questions that might take you to new places:

What if my mind *weren't* already made up about things? What might I discover then? (openness)

What *more* could be possible if I stopped *fighting* with life, and didn't need to impose my will? (acceptance)

What if I trusted my own inner voice 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 rather know *that* it would all work out? (trust)

What if there really *were* an underlying order to life? Am I willing to step into its experience? (courage)

What if I allowed wisdom to show up when conditions allow, not when I force it with my will? (patience)

What if I could really *live* with these questions, every day, as a new way of being? (practice)

**Life lessons from nature:** Since the dawn of humanity, we've been seekers of truth, searchers for answers to life's (and our own) great mysteries. We're *programmed* for curiosity and wonder, to find "something bigger" in our existence. Galileo is a favorite example, who, just over 400 years ago, discovered four moons circling Jupiter. His discovery proved beyond [intellectual] doubt that not everything revolved around the earth. From a New York Times article: "Galileo's achievement was the end of geocentrism, but it was hardly the end of ignorance or magical thinking. When obstinacy places reason under siege, as it does to this day, when denial politics prevents action on climate change, or when fundamentalism defames biological science in the classroom, it helps to recall a man who set a different example 400 years ago. It took just a wooden tube and some polished lenses, a critical, inquisitive mind, and four points of light that didn't behave the way they were supposed to."

But discoveries tell only half a story. While *biologically* wired to search for truth, it seems we're *culturally* wired to deny what we find. The major obstacle, as I see it, is that we fear the crumbling of what we *previously* knew as truth. Despite knowing our world is uncertain by nature, we cling to a perception of its certainty, as if it formed the very earth on which we walk (which isn't so certain, either, it turns out). Galileo was no stranger to this idea; he knew his findings would end the prevailing worldview, a biblical cosmology held as *truth* for centuries. That view didn't tumble with grace. As a matter of fact, it's still alive and well, over 400 years later.

Passionate, painstaking observation, fueled by curiosity and wonder ... accompanied by the willingness to be surprised by encountering a result out of the ordinary that it made their heads spin ... yet go right back to the noticing ... not once retreating in fear of the unknown, not once dismissing the observation out of fear, not once fearing the havoc raised when the world found out what had been discovered. That's how Galileo discovered Jupiter's moons. It's how builders of ancient stone circles and medicine wheels came to know the workings of the sun, moon, stars, planets and seasons. It's how Darwin postulated his findings about evolution. It's how Einstein formulated his ideas on relativity.

**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.

**Book of the month:** I went looking for a current book on awareness, observation and critical thought. I came up empty. What I found served more to **prove** my assertion in this article than to shine light on it. Example: *Weaponized Lies; How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era.* Wow! If this book is in fact about critical thinking, why the need to add **drama** to the title, when the whole idea is to get drama **out** of the thought process? And what **is** the "post-truth era" anyway? Ominous. Perhaps go look for yourself; see what you find. Be sure to use your conscious awareness and curiosity to notice how titles (and books) can lead, or mislead. And if you're on Cape Cod, you can do your own search at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.