



A FIELD GUIDE TO NOT KNOWING

*"Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter,
conducted with passion and discipline." – Parker Palmer*

THE CHALLENGE

"I don't know." Three simple words. Although nearly impossible for many to say, these words open a world of new possibility and learning. But we live in an unforgiving society, one that continually tells us how life (and we) *should* be – we *should* know it all, we *should* get it all right, we *should* avoid mistakes, we *should* go along with other people's thinking, we *should* hide our vulnerability. These lessons have left us in fear of saying, "I don't know." Regardless of what we "think" when reading these words, everyday behavior says we just can't accept "not knowing." What's up here, anyway?

Life is far too complex, uncertain, unpredictable and chaotic for us to know it all. At the conscious, rational level, we likely agree. At the unconscious level, however, we can't stand it. We like *knowing* much better. Driving this paradox, it seems, is the human need to feel safe, and it seems that the unconscious mind has equated knowing with *certainty*, which it then equates to *safety*. The connection has little validity, but throughout life we've learned it as so. So, we tend to respond (unconsciously, of course), by living in denial of not knowing, then pretending we *do* know. This leads, in turn, to defending our baseless stories as if they constituted evidence for truth.

This stress of *knowing we don't know while pretending we do* takes a huge toll on our lives. Yet unaware, we blame others, life, the world, even ourselves ... while the real culprit is an invisible, unconsciously-adopted way of thinking that drives all we do. It's time to start looking at the true source of the problem.

Evolved and adapted for exploration into the unknown, we're now at a place where complexity, uncertainty, chaos, technology and the pace of life are beyond our ability to keep up. Clearly, we're in "not knowing" most of the time; it's just the way life is. Yet when we deny not knowing, we deny what is true. *We don't know*. The problem isn't that we don't know; the problem is the judgment that we need to know anyway, that something is wrong with us if we don't. Yet we fail to see this.

If we could accept that we don't know, we would see that we're off course maybe 95% of the time. With that acceptance, we'd then see that the skill that could serve us best is not how to control our lives (we fail), but how to continually change course in the face of life's inevitable uncertainty. Great lives begin with the openness and willingness to see and accept how things really are. Clueless of this, we instead hone the skill of pretending not to be off track in the first place ... then wonder why we struggle, why we're stressed.

What could happen if we accepted not knowing – completely and non-judgmentally? (Seeing life *as it is* doesn't mean agreeing with it; it's just clarity of perception.) When we say, "*I don't know*," we create open space for learning and new possibility (as well as the freedom to explore it). We also allow others to accept *their* "not knowing," too; this invites mutual exploration and learning.

If, instead of hiding from fear and vulnerability, you got to know your fears and vulnerabilities, you'd discover the thinking that created them. With awareness of that thinking, your thinking would change – naturally. Self-trust transcends fear. You'd find that you ask bigger questions, connect more deeply with others, embrace uncertainty, learn, create more possibility, and be your true self. As Brené Brown says in *Daring Greatly*, showing vulnerability is a display of courage, not fear.

Awareness and acceptance lead you to the *wisdom of not knowing*. Both in my own life and in the experience of helping others on their journeys, I've found one clear trait that distinguishes those who experience meaning and peace from those who don't, and that's the ability to deal constructively with uncertainty and not knowing.

***"To control your cow, give it a bigger pasture."
- Zen Master Suzuki Roshi***