



## IN SEARCH OF IGNORANCE

Cultivating a Beginner's Mind  
H B Gelatt

*"Genuine ignorance is profitable because it leads to humility,  
curiosity and open-mindedness." John Dewey*

A lot of people are working on the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Not many people are even discussing Genuine Ignorance (GI). I believe ignorance has been getting a bad rap. Perhaps that is because in our culture we believe that intelligence is a good thing to have, even if it's artificial, and ignorance is a bad thing to have, even if it's genuine. But if we could promote genuine ignorance as being profitable, it might catch on. In America, being profitable is probably more popular than being intelligent.

This essay is part of my Process of Illumination, which promotes an open-minded and inclusive worldview to save the world. I want to join John Dewey in promoting genuine ignorance. Of course we aren't the only ones. Will Durant once exclaimed, "Education is the progressive discovery of our ignorance." And Will Rogers explained that, "Everyone is ignorant, only on different subjects."

### **The Paradox of Knowing**

*Facts are the enemy of truth. Don Quixote*  
*Knowing becomes the antithesis of learning. George Land*

We will need our curiosity, humility, and open-mindedness to create a collective worldview that contributes to a positive future for everyone and the planet. It is well known that humans have a need to know. One definition of intelligence is the capacity to acquire knowledge. Ignorance is defined as lacking in knowledge. But here comes the paradox.

*Old knowledge blocks new knowing. Nietzsche*

That's because what you already know often prevents you from learning something new.

Humans not only have a need to know, we want things to be perfectly clear. We want to know that this is this and that is that. It is so much easier and comfortable to be certain. However, today, the "new sciences" are based on things like the uncertainty principle, chaos theory, relativity, and complexity. Being certain may have become a thing of the past. In today's world, to know for sure may not be intelligent behavior.

Ignorance is beginning to be accepted --- if not popular. Bookstores now have a section for dummies: The Internet for Dummies, Parenting for Dummies, Philosophy for Dummies, etc. And people are buying these books for themselves! Even the movie Dumb and Dumber was a big hit. Genuine ignorance may be catching on. How do you do it?

Here is an illuminating strategy to try.

### **Cultivate a Beginner's Mind**

*A beginner's mind is a mind that is willing to see everything as if for the first time.*  
Zen saying

The beginner's mind is what Zen practitioners use when describing the notion that learning requires an empty cup. When full of what you already know it is hard to acquire new knowledge. A beginner's mind is trying to discover its ignorance, not to disguise it. This empty cup, beginner's mind idea is like genuine ignorance, and being child-like.



Children don't know a lot so they learn a lot. They have a beginner's mind. So you might try thinking like a child. A child hasn't yet learned rational, adult thinking. Almost all creative thinking techniques, brainstorming for example, involve the abandonment of rational, intelligent thinking processes. Sometimes, not always, you need to think and act playfully and foolishly (unintelligently). It is interesting to note that playfulness and foolishness are considered childlike traits. Try it, you might like it.

For example, in deciding whether to accept a new job or to quit your present job, or to march in a protest or to move to another city, ask: What else could I do? What might happen if I do? What are other possibilities? What else am I ignorant about? Seek answers not just with your intelligence but also with your intuition, your imagination, your impractical self, your dreams, your fantasies, and your not knowing, child-like beginner's mind. This is using your "ignorance" to an advantage of discovering possibilities and learning. Before bombing Iraq, what if President Bush had asked, What else could I do? What else might happen? What am I ignorant about?

An open, beginner's mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in the rut of our own expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does. No moment is the same as any other. Each is unique and contains unique possibilities.

*Beginner's mind reminds us of this simple truth.* Jon Kabat Zinn

The goal of artificial intelligence is to produce intelligent computers. The goal of genuine ignorance is to produce intelligent humans. This can be accomplished if we redefine intelligence as the capacity to learn rather than the capacity to know. If learning could gain equal status with knowing, then genuine ignorance might become popular — and part of being wise.

### **Reflective Illumination**

*"The greatest obstacle to discovering the shape of the earth was not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge."* Anonymous

**In Search of Ignorance** recommends that when you are thinking about your future or the future of the world, or making a decision about tomorrow, sometimes, not always, employ your genuine ignorance. Genuine ignorance will be advantageous because others, less comfortable not knowing, are stuck in certainty. It is very hard to be humble, curious, and open-minded while being certain.

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